



Hinduism and Judaism: An Overview

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Received: 13 November 2020 / Accepted: 4 December 2021 / Published online: 12 January 2022
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Abstract

The paper offers a comprehensive historical and conceptual overview of Jewish-Hindu relations. It offers an encyclopedic overview of historical roots, theological differences, legal challenges and present-day relations. Special attention is given to the possibilities of how Jews can handle the claim that Hinduism is idolatrous and to its present-day consequences. Hindu-Jewish summits form the last chapter in the history of relations, and their declarations are analyzed as part of the overview. The paper concludes with a projection of areas for future development of the relationship.

Keywords Hinduism · Judaism · Theology · Interfaith

The present essay offers an overview of Judaism, Hinduism and their relationship, past, present and future.¹ Such an overview must take into account three distinct dimensions:

- A. Points of historical contact, influence and encounter between the two traditions, as expressed in religious concepts and practices.
- B. Views of one tradition towards the other.
- C. The state of relationship between the two traditions.

While these are, in principle, three distinct dimensions, there is overlap between them, and they feed into one another. The discussion below, even when it focuses on one of these dimensions, is often relevant to all of them.

The “*and*” in the title of this essay would suggest reciprocity, leading us to consider both dimensions from the perspective of both religions. Although encounters and views of another religion should be based on contact and direct knowledge, one

¹ This essay summarizes some of the main theses of Goshen-Gottstein (2016), while offering both bibliographic and conceptual updates.

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of the characteristics of the religious relationship between Hinduism and Judaism is its lack of reciprocity, with most of the interest and reflection taking part on the Jewish side. Accordingly, the essay will cover the following points:

- A. Historical overview of relationship
- B. Hindu views of Judaism
- C. Historical Jewish views of India and Hinduism—the wisdom paradigm
- D. The present Jewish encounter with Hinduism—contexts and characteristics
- E. The problem of Hindu idolatry—ultra-Orthodox application
- F. Legitimizing Hinduism despite image worship—contemporary rabbinic positions
- G. Leadership summits and declarations—achievements and challenges
- H. Judaism and Hinduism—the future of a relationship.

A. Historical overview of relationship

Judaism's encounter with most religious traditions has been based on some meaningful contact, even if historically conflictual or theologically inadequate. The case of Jewish-Hindu encounter is one in which geographic distance and the relative isolation of the Jewish and Hindu communities have kept the encounter at the margins of both Jewish and Hindu awareness and interest. What little was known of Hinduism is either a carryover from Muslim and other medieval authorities or the testimony of the very few travelers who provided early reports on India. It is likely that the full extent of exposure to Hindu ideas, and the contact that led to them, have not yet come to light. Kabbalistic literature contains various motifs that might best be explained in light of Hindu practices, even though we are unable yet to trace their evolution (Idel 1988, 107–108).

It is only during the twentieth century, and especially its later decades, that more substantial contact developed, based on advances in travel, communication and the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel in 1992.

The earliest contacts were based on trade and the information channels it created (Bar Ilan 2000). These date back to the first millennium BCE. However, they have little impact on the view or relations between two religious traditions. A little more knowledge comes to the fore during the Hellenistic period, but does not amount to an encounter or a view of another religion. Significantly, India is viewed as a land of sages, and it is this image that shapes Jewish views for close to two thousand years (Schmidt 1994, 48–53; Marks 2000, 2007).

A very small Jewish community has existed in India for well over a millennium, by some accounts even two millennia. Just how hoary its antiquity is remains a subject for different views between local tradition and scholarly evaluation (Katz 2000). This community is more significant for the study of the diversity of Jewish communities in various diasporas than for a view of Hinduism or Hindu-Jewish relations. The Jewish community in various locations in India (Cochin, Bombay, Calcutta and more) was never a center of Jewish learning or an important seat for authoritative rulings on Jewish matters. Consequently, we lack considered discussions of how

Jewish leaders viewed Hinduism, and in particular how they understood Hindu religion, its multiplicity of gods and the worship of images. What characterizes this community is its profound acculturation within the fabric of Hindu society, adapting itself to the caste system, which has been internalized within community organization (Katz and Goldberg 2005; Weil 1994). The deep acculturation goes hand in hand with the fact that the Jewish community was never persecuted, and that it benefited from the prevailing attitude of Hindu religious tolerance. This tolerance seems to be reciprocated in common views of Hinduism, recognizing it as a legitimate path to God (Fischel 1971, 60).

Instances of Jews advancing along the spiritual path of India or Hinduism are extremely rare, and Said Sarmad, whose precise religious identity remains a subject of debate, may be the unique historical case (Katz 2000).² The twentieth century saw increasing contact with and exposure to Hinduism. Several Jews played important roles in Hindu religious groups during the earlier part of the century. The most noted among these is Mira Alfassa, the Mother of Pondicherry and spiritual counterpart of Sri Aurobindo (Yayawardena 1995). Here we have not only a prominent leader, activist or teacher, but also a Jewish person who is viewed by devotees as divine. Alfassa's Jewish roots were fairly weak and her Judaism was mainly ethnic. In the course of her spiritual formation she did spend time with an esoteric teacher who taught kabbalah, Max Theon, but his version of kabbalah is at great remove from traditional kabbalistic teaching. Other Jewish figures who played a role in Hindu religious movements include Paul Brunton, who brought Ramana Maharshi to world attention, as did another Jewish disciple, Suleyman S. Cohen, as well as Maurice Frydman, known as Swami Bharatananda, and Swami Vijayananda. In all these cases, we encounter individual Jews making their way through Hindu religious movements, but no meaningful encounter between Judaism and Hinduism.

The coming of Hindu gurus to the west, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, saw great involvement of Jewish participants in specifically Hindu movements. Jews occupied a place, and took up leadership positions, within these various movements, far in excess of their proportional representation in society. Jewish observers readily associate this attraction to the prominence of the spiritual quest among Jewish individuals. Some Jewish members of Hindu groups found their way to more spiritual, mainly Hassidic/Orthodox forms of Judaism (Linzer 1996). Others have made Hinduism their home. Unlike historical precedents of joining other religions that led to renunciation of Jewish identity, these individuals maintain awareness of their Judaism and a positive attitude to it, applying prevailing Hindu openness to other religions.

A flood of Israeli travelers to India, following the establishment of diplomatic relations, have created a new wave of encounter. Many of the travelers are religious and engage various Hindu practices, techniques, meditations, etc., as part of their own spiritual quest. They have made the contemporary Jewish-Hindu encounter an

² I am presently completing a monograph, together with Prof. Muhammad Suheyl Umar, titled *Jewish Sage, Muslim Sage, Hindu Sage: Said Sarmad and the Problem of Multiple Religious Belonging*.

important issue for Jewish law (ruling on the status of Hinduism as idolatry) and educators, who struggle to accommodate this movement.

Nothing similar has taken place in terms of Hindus' fascination with or attraction to Judaism. Neither in terms of intellectual or spiritual interests, nor in terms of tourist travel, do we encounter remotely similar processes on the Hindu side. Thus, a movement that is gaining increasing momentum takes place in what is essentially a one-sided manner.

B. Hindu views of Judaism

Hindu views of Judaism are much indebted to colonial heritage. Much of what Judaism might have had to offer to Hindus in terms of a spiritual vision has been provided by Christianity or Islam. The Christian identification of Judaism and the Old Testament has led to Hindu thinkers viewing Judaism through such Christian eyes, rather than in ways that correspond to Jewish self-understanding. Swami Vivekananda is paradigmatic (Egorova 2007). An examination of his references to Judaism reveals that he only knows Judaism as the forerunner of Christianity. The only Judaism known to Vivekananda is that of the Old Testament. While he does possess some sense of the personality of the modern Jew, he seems to know nothing of post-biblical Judaism. The same is true of another important Hindu figure, Swami Dayananda, the founder of the Arya Samaj, except for the fact that his views are even more polarized than those of Vivekananda, hence his critique of Judaism more uncompromising. Hindu authors end up, unwittingly, perpetuating Christian stereotypes of Judaism in the context of their ideological struggle against Christianity. Things only begin to change as Jews and Judaism are gradually encountered on their own terms. Gandhi had significant contact with Jews (Chatterjee 1992; Lev 2012). However, it seems that the contact was primarily with Jews, rather than with Judaism. Much of the attention of Hindu intelligentsia in the earlier part of the twentieth century was focused on the Jewish problem and the Zionist movement, not leaving much room for a self-standing appreciation of Judaism. Rabindranath Tagore seems to be one figure who may have had a broader appreciation of Judaism, alongside his support for the Zionist movement. This is in part based on personal relationships, but also on the fact that he was a more cosmopolitan figure, and visited major Jewish communities in the United States (Lev 2008). It is only with the advent of inter-religious dialogue in recent decades that Judaism is beginning to be appreciated by Hindu thinkers and leaders on its own terms. While Judaism remains little known in India, the state of Israel commands much respect and there is broad perceived commonality between India's struggles with Pakistan and the Israeli-Arab conflict, leading to implicit identification with and admiration for Israel.

C. Historical Jewish views of India and Hinduism—the wisdom paradigm

While Hindu recognition and appreciation of Judaism is very recent, Jews have entertained views of Hinduism, based on distant reports, for nearly two millennia. A consideration of these sources suggests one central paradigm that governed Jewish

views—wisdom. The category of wisdom is readily juxtaposed with revelation, thereby creating a phenomenology of religions that do or do not rely upon revelation. While Hindus, as Jews understood them, lack revelation, there is nevertheless something admirable about them for the wisdom they have attained and the disciplined life that leads to it (Marks 2000, 2007). Most Jewish references to India and its religious culture are indebted to this way of conceptualizing the religions. This also holds the key to Jewish superiority, as taken for granted by Jewish authors, as well as to the ways of viewing it in a positive light. The image of the Indian sage as one who has a true God but lacks prophecy emerges time and again in various medieval Jewish sources (Marks 2007, 62), hence Saadiah Gaon's (tenth-century) reference to Brahmins in the course of a discussion of the claims of Christians and Muslims for the abrogation of the Torah (*The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 3,9). Saadiah can use the Brahmins in the context of a theoretical appeal to Adam and his traditions precisely because they are outside the framework of prophecy, hence a test case for his argument. In another context, the Brahmins are portrayed as saying, "We do not behave according to law or prophet or image or god... We recognize from ourselves the cause and principle of wisdom, and our mind teaches us the way we should work" (Marks 2007, 63).

There are some important exceptions to this wisdom-based positive view, including such notable figures as Maimonides and Yehuda Halevy. The latter speaks of the people of India and how they "arouse the indignation of the followers of religions through their talk, whilst they anger them with their idols, talismans and witchcraft" (Kuzari I, 61). In Halevy's hands, the distinction between revelation and wisdom becomes more extreme, identified with good and evil respectively. Rather than positive appreciation of wisdom, we find rejection and condemnation of magic.

The heritage of the Middle Ages is one of the resources for contemporary attitudes towards India and its religious traditions, leading to some positive evaluations of Hindu wisdom. An important bridge is Menashe ben Israel, the seventeenth-century Amsterdam rabbi.

Similarly, when he (Abraham) went down to Egypt and lived there, he taught this philosophy, after which he sent the sons of his concubines away from Isaac while he was yet alive towards the East to their holy land, India. They also disseminated this faith. Behold, you may see there the Abrahamites, who are today called Brahmins; they are the sons of Abraham our patriarch and they were the first in India to spread this faith, as Appolonius Tionius, who spoke with them and King Yercha face to face, testified... And they spoke the truth, for from the seed of Abraham this ideology was created anew. From there, the new belief spread all over India, as is evident from the writings of that period. Their faith is, however, often thought of as Pythagoras' innovation, since it had disappeared for a few years, but he was not the originator. Also, this was the code followed by Alexander Polister who heard and studied it from the prophet Ezekiel who was his mentor... (Menashe ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayim* 4,21).

Underlying this passage is a reading of Genesis 25,6, according to which Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and then sent them off to the east. This verse has a rich history of interpretation with reference to India (Marks

2000). Menashe ben Israel relates to more concrete knowledge about Hindus and their beliefs. The description of Hindus and their practices is received positively by him. He is able to contain the beliefs of the Hindus within his worldview, by suggesting they originate with the teachings of Abraham. Gen. 25,6 thus provides a key for affirming the validity of Hindu teachings as having Abrahamic origins.

The positive valuation of Indian wisdom by Menashe ben Israel provides the theoretical foundations to one of the most interesting attempts to relate Hinduism and Judaism, that of Rabbi Matityahu Glazerson. Glazerson authored a book titled *From Hinduism to Judaism* (Glazerson 1984). Relying on Menashe ben Israel, Glazerson approaches Hinduism in an open and positive way. It is probably the most favorable and positive treatment of Hinduism by any Jewish author. This is made possible through the twofold strategy of concentrating on Hinduism as wisdom, rather than worship or religion, and approaching that wisdom as Judaism's own. The recent and still mostly unpublished work of Rabbi Daniel Sperber is another attempt to view Hindu wisdom positively and to draw out parallels with Jewish religious understandings.

D. The present Jewish Encounter with Hinduism—contexts and characteristics

The following section offers an overview of the different contexts in which Hindu-Jewish encounter occurs, suggesting how multifaceted the contemporary encounter is.

1. The first context is that of mass emigration of Hindus to the west, creating what is referred to as the Hindu diaspora. Diaspora is the sole context where Jewish and Hindu communities live alongside one another. This is fundamentally an encounter between equals (Katz 1996, 332). There is no history of power relations and attendant asymmetries to complicate Jewish-Hindu relations in the diaspora.
2. The second context is a consequence of living together, increasing opportunity for getting to know each other and also for falling in love and marrying across traditions. Some attention has been given to the rise in Jewish-Hindu interreligious marriages (Caplan 2004). There is potential here for long-term development that may displease both Hindu and Jewish traditional communities, but that nevertheless is sure to create significant moments of encounter and may lead to individual attempts to bridge the two traditions in daily home life.
3. Common living also leads to some level of interfaith engagement. Interfaith councils now exist in most towns in the United States and in many places across Europe. Such dialogue is not limited to the local community level. It takes place on the international level as well. Several organizations, such as the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, Religions for Peace and others, bring together leaders of all faith traditions and provide a framework for Jewish and Hindu leaders to come together. While the Hindu-Jewish encounter is not at the forefront, both religions draw from their respective resources in an attempt to address common concerns in the framework of broader interreligious activity.

4. A fourth context is the academic encounter. One type of academic encounter is the encounter with ideas in a comparative context (see below). Here I refer specifically to the kind of study that intentionally brings together scholars of both religions or that channels experienced encounter into the academic domain.

The American Academy of Religion has served, for over a decade, as a home for a certain comparativist analysis that creates encounter between ideas, as well as between scholars of the two religions. The unit called *Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms*, founded by Barbara Holdrege, seeks to establish new paradigms in the study of religion drawn from the realities of the two religions, in contradistinction to Protestant categories that prevail in the academy (Holdrege 1999). For detailed reflection on the work of this unit, set in the broader context of a comprehensive review of scholarship in the field, see Holdrege (2018). While the comparativist agenda need not involve actual Jews and Hindus, it does offer foundations for an analysis and appreciation of the two religions and provides a starting point for further encounter. Such academic groups and projects bring together scholars of Hinduism and Judaism on an equal basis (even if they are not themselves practitioners). The discussions explore in reciprocal manner issues in both traditions. The academic setting allows this forum to flourish based on academic buy-in of participants. Religious communities and leaders do not drive this group, but only scholarly concerns.

The academic context, especially in the United States, has also given birth to a field of studies, titled Indo-Judaic studies. An early volume that set the stage for continuing discussions is Hananya Goodman (1994). Nathan Katz has pioneered this field, with the launch of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* and a multi-authored volume that explored the parameters and possibilities of the field (Katz et al. 2007). The range of topics is broad and addresses multiple points of intersection between Jews and Judaism and India and Hinduism. While most participants in such an enterprise tend to be Jewish, a number of Hindu scholars are also active, making it a site for encounter. Some noteworthy titles in this field of studies are Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah* (Holdrege 1996), Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism* (Goshen-Gottstein 2016), Ithamar Theodor and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, *Dharma and Halacha* (Theodor and Greenberg 2018), and Alan Brill, *Rabbi on the Ganges* (Brill 2020).

Finally, Israelis seem to take a great interest in the academic study of things Hindu and Indian. Israel is the only country in the world where over 90% of the students attending introductory classes on Hinduism and India have actually visited India (Shulman and Weil 2008, vii). This is hardly reciprocated, with very few, perhaps no, experts of Judaism on the Hindu side. While this owes in part to the status of religious studies in India, it also reflects the broader asymmetry in the relationship and the relative lack of knowledge of Judaism as a self-standing religion in Indian awareness. In recent years, several academic chairs for the study of Hinduism have been established in Israeli universities, and since 2012 an annual Jewish-Hindu (or Asian) conference has been coordinated by Ithamar Theodor.

5. The most important and challenging context in which Jews encounter Hinduism is the growing exposure of Jews to Hinduism either through exposure to Indian teachers and movements coming to the west or through travel to India. A large part of contemporary Jewish encounter with Hinduism takes place through travel. This is a unique form of encounter. If most encounters between different faith communities have taken place, historically, in situations of common living, this present-day encounter is to a large extent an encounter of travelers. This has various ramifications. Travelers undertake an encounter and are willing to experiment with greater ease and freedom, especially in a context perceived as novel, like the relative novelty of the Jewish-Hindu encounter. A travel-based encounter lacks political implications and allows an exploration of personal transformative dynamics.

Sociologist Darya Maoz has conducted extensive studies of the motivation and practices of different travelers to India and notes that motivation, and consequently how time is spent in India itself, varies according to different age groups. The older the traveler, the more his or her travel is informed by a spiritual quest, often finding expression in long-term commitment to spiritual practices learned in India (Maoz 2006). Maoz suggests that in many ways, the travel to India constitutes a kind of rite of passage, coming as it does at crucial points in the life of the individual. Accordingly, she sees the visit to India as fulfilling a particular psychological and spiritual function in the personal life of the traveler and points to a correspondence between the different stations of life and the respective rites of passage undertaken by traveling to India. Maoz notes that 20% of Israeli travelers to India are religious, having imbibed the knowledge of Torah and practical Judaism and continuing to observe Jewish law and ritual as part of their ongoing practice. Rabbis have started traveling to India as well. Some have done so in order to better understand what their students are undergoing. But quite a number of rabbis have traveled to India as part of their own personal quest and out of their own personal curiosity and intrigue with all that concerns the Jewish encounter with Hindu spirituality and civilization.

The encounter with Hinduism takes place at a time that many consider a time of crisis for Jewish identity. This crisis touches identity, meaning and affiliation and afflicts large parts of the Jewish people and Israeli society. Crisis is not simply a description of the situation; it is part of the self-awareness of many in leadership positions, as well as of their flock. The crisis is also a crisis in relation to finding God and spirituality in Judaism. These are perceived as more readily available in India, or at least available without the political, sociological and lifestyle “baggage” that would accompany similar experiences in a Jewish framework.

Laurie Patton and Shalom Goldman have surveyed the place of India in Israeli literature and movies. In attempting to understand why India fascinates the Israeli imagination, they raise several possibilities (Patton and Goldman 2001). The first has to do with how India is positioned as an alternative to Jewish culture. India allows exploration of, but not commitment to, the rules of the mystical path. It seems to provide a non-dualist antidote to the dry intellectualism of talmudic debates. The perceived absolute authority associated with Judaism is replaced with the directness of experience, without sullyng it with the political power

associated with religion in Israel. In this understanding, India functions as a kind of *alter ego*, in terms of Israeli or Jewish consciousness. As Patton and Goldberg suggest, Jews do not turn to India for those expressions of the religious life that they can find back home, but for those that they consider are lacking in Judaism. The most obvious rubric under which this can be classified is “spirituality.”

The quest for spirituality and how travelers integrate what they have found in their encounter with Hinduism yield various shades of association and continuity between Hindu spiritual practices and Jewish identity. There exists a broad spectrum of positions and ways of affirming Jewish identity while upholding Hindu spirituality or practice. At the one extreme is profound commitment to the Jewish spiritual path, supported by practices and techniques drawn from Hinduism; at the other is the virtual substitution of Jewish identity by Hindu identity, maintaining only formal or ethnic Jewish identity. The rich and ever-evolving encounter between the two religions will yield various shades of integration and overlaps in identity, as individuals navigate their way in relation to both traditions.

E. The problem of Hindu idolatry—ultra-Orthodox application

By far, the question that is of greatest concern for a Jewish view of Hinduism is the Hindu view of God and the use of images in Hindu worship. This issue touches a core concern and possibly the most fundamental identity marker of Judaism. In terms of self identity, it relates to what Judaism considers to be its most characteristic and fundamental faith tenet—belief in the one God, and the avoidance of representation of the divine. In Judaism’s self understanding, it has been engaged in a battle and delivered a consistent message on this point for close to three millennia. *Avoda zarah*, foreign worship, idolatry, is a constitutive Jewish category, through which it views other religions, and Hinduism is, by common views, found lacking with regard to the demand of purity of worship, thereby constituting *avoda zarah*. The implications of the declaration of another religion as *avoda zarah* are avoidance of contact with ritual and ritually related objects, limitation on trade—but above all, a fundamental devaluation and withholding of legitimation or recognition of another religion as a valid or true spiritual path. Thus, *avoda zarah* informs Jewish theology of religions and is the most central issue that Jewish thinkers and legalists will address in their appreciation and evaluation of another religion.

With its many gods and ubiquitous image worship, Hinduism obviously provides a challenge with reference to *avoda zarah*. Legal experts in early modernity took it for granted that Hinduism is found inadequate in terms of the demands Judaism places upon other religions and is therefore to be considered *avoda zarah*. This attitude exploded in the public arena in 2004, at an interesting juncture of commerce and religion, bringing together Judaism and Hinduism.

Orthodox Jewish women cover their hair after marriage. Some do so by wearing a wig, known as a *sheitel* in Yiddish. Apparently the most convenient and largest source of human hair for such wigs are Hindu temples, where devotees shave their heads, as an “offering” to the deity, though the exact status of such

offering is not identical to sacrificial offering. Jews are not allowed to derive any benefit or pleasure from *avoda zarah*. This comes into potential conflict with the use of hair offered to the deity in Hindu temples. The question came up in 2004: Was the offering of hair by Hindu devotees an offering of *avoda zarah* that should be forbidden to Jewish women? Following a brief inquiry by a rabbinic emissary, who went to Tirupati to study the matter personally, Rabbi Elyashiv, one of the most important leaders and decisors of a certain stream of ultra-Orthodox Jews, ruled that wigs that originated in Hindu temples could not be worn by Orthodox Jewish women. Consequently, Rabbi Elyashiv issued a ruling that such wigs could not be used. Idolatrous offerings may not be enjoyed in any shape, and the only way to dispose of them is through burning, reflecting the Torah's strong concern with idolatry and how it seeks to avoid it, at any cost. The wigs were to be burned (Flug 2005; Fleming and Yoshiko Reed 2011). This made headline news, as Jews in Israel and New York were pictured burning wigs on street corners. It also deeply offended the Hindu community in ways that the rabbis never imagined, and reflected badly on Hassidic and ultra-Orthodox Jews in general.

This event illustrated how much concern there still is for avoiding certain forms of worship. It also showed how unavoidable certain contacts are in the present day and age. But it also showed the limitation of the visual dimension and inbuilt limitations in how many Jews approach the subject of *avoda zarah*. As Daniel Sperber has noted (Sperber 2009), the entire discussion relied only on the visual and made no attempt to understand Hindu theology or the meaning of its practice. The fundamental question of whether Hinduism should be considered *avoda zarah* in the first place was never critically raised, apparently because the visual encounter with image worship decided the issue before it could be raised. While rabbis found a way around the situation, by recognizing that the hair was not strictly speaking a sacrifice or an offering, they failed to engage the deeper issue of the meaning of Hindu worship and faith or to establish a procedure by means of which another religious system, especially one with which Judaism barely has a history, can be evaluated.

One of the methodological issues the *sheitel* affair brought to light was “who speaks for Hinduism?” For the most part, reference to Hinduism follows the broad strokes by means of which Judaism has related to Christianity and Islam. However, the Hindu reality is far more complex, both in lacking unity, and in the diversity of perspectives and views. The question of image worship takes on another light when considered not simply in the context of common or folk practice, but in light of Hindu philosophy. As encounters between Jewish and Hindu leadership, described below, advanced, the issue of the meaning of Hindu rituals and the nature of Hindu faith emerged as a key concern. The philosophical view, especially the monistic view of *advaita vedanta*, emerged as an important counterpoint to the testimony of ritual worship. What may have been taken for granted in light of image worship became subject to further consideration, as the philosophical understanding of Hinduism was considered as a backdrop to Hindu worship.

F. Legitimizing Hinduism despite image worship—contemporary rabbinic positions

Several rabbis have expressed themselves on the question of Hinduism as *avoda zarah*, taking a stand that is the opposite of the public manifestation of wig burning. These rabbis can be characterized sociologically as not being part of the ultra-orthodox world and as possessing a more dialogical mentality and broader perspectives. This perspective translates itself not only in relation to Hinduism, but also with reference to Christianity, which poses similar challenges, even if less extreme. Accordingly, rabbinic authorities that have followed one trajectory of Jewish law that declares Christianity to not be *avoda zarah* have been willing to extend this view to Hinduism.

There are two strategies in rabbinic law that would apply to both Christianity and Hinduism in terms of *avoda zarah*. The first is founded on the recognition that non-Jews are not obligated to follow the same stringency of pure approach to the divine that obligates Jews. Non-Jews, by this view, may worship God alongside another being, a construct known as *Shituf*, worship by association. It is sufficient that non-Jews have a sense and knowledge of God as they turn to Him, but they are not required to turn to Him alone and may worship another being alongside God. Rabbi Isaac Herzog, the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, discussed the status of other religions in the soon to be formed state (Herzog 1981, minorities, 178–179). Christianity is legitimated through permissibility of *Shituf*. While acknowledging his limited knowledge, Rabbi Herzog considers it likely that Hinduism too should be considered permissible on similar grounds; that is, Hindus may worship other beings, such as natural forces, but they do also worship God, the absolute, creator, thereby remaining within parameters that are permissible for non-Jews.

More recently, the issue of Hindu worship and the demands of purity of approach was revisited by the renowned talmudist, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (Steinsaltz 2005). Steinsaltz develops a notion of Jewish tolerance that is based on different demands made of different groups. Non-Jews do not have to follow the strict demands placed upon Jews. In this context, Steinsaltz refers explicitly to Hindus:

What about indic religions and various kinds of Buddhism. Again, I do not believe that a definitive solution is possible, but a partial solution may be considered.

It is important to introduce a distinction between theology and religious practice. In the ancient religions grouped under the name of Hinduism, there are many gods and local shrines, but the theological principles that guide belief and provide a uniformity of moral standards assume that all the deities revered in India or elsewhere are forms of, expressions of, or names for, one ultimate reality or God. Saivites propose Siva as the best name (among many names) for this ultimacy; Vaisnavites prefer Visnu or Krishna; *atman* is an Upanisadic word for the same principle—and *brahman* is perhaps the most common way among non-Muslim, non-Christian Indians of naming ultimacy...

By the standards of Jewish law as applied to Jews, Hinduism (and Buddhism) do not count as monotheistic traditions. However, the essential point of the Noahide laws is that the standards of Jewish law do not apply to non-Jews. Radically pure monotheism is expected by Judaism only from Jews. The Noahide laws do not preclude gentile religions from developing softer,

more complex, and compromised forms of monotheism. Under the Noahide laws, it is possible to assume that Hinduism and Buddhism are sufficiently monotheistic in principle for moral Hindus and Buddhists to enter the gentile's gate into heaven. Jewish law regards the compromises made or tolerated by the world's major religions as ways of rendering essentially monotheistic theologies easier in practice for large populations of adherents. The fierceness of Islamic opposition to such compromises has no counterpart in Judaism. In Islam, it is seriously blasphemous for anyone of whatever faith to combine belief in the one God with popular ideas about other heavenly powers or with subtle theological doctrines such as the Trinity. Islam cannot tolerate such compromises because the truth that they violate is applicable universally and not simply to Muslims. The problem is that Islam is radically monotheistic (like Judaism) yet is also (unlike Judaism, which is the religion of one people) universalistic as well. (Steinsalz, 44–45)

Steinsalz offers us a corrective to exclusive reliance on images and the visible view of Hinduism, by focusing on the philosophy that underlies these. The grounds for legitimating Hinduism contain a safeguard against Jewish attraction to Hinduism. Softer forms of monotheism are only valid for non-Jews. What is permissible for non-Jews would be considered idolatrous for Jews. Thus, respect and protection of identity are achieved in a single move.

There is another, even more principled, strategy that has served a Jewish view of other religions and that can be applied to a Jewish view of Hinduism. This view is associated with the fourteenth-century rabbi Menachem Meiri. According to Meiri, *avoda zarah* is largely a matter of the past and no longer relevant, at least not for the European society in which he operates. Rather than focus on whether a certain practice or ritual is idolatrous, Meiri judges the overall quality of the religion. Contemporary religions are law-abiding and inculcate a sense of morality. This moral quality may be understood as addressing the core concerns of the biblical prohibition against idolatry, or more significantly as an indicator of the identity of God who commanded the moral way of living as the same God recognized by Judaism. If the religion follows a moral way of living, this moral living tells us something about the God who commanded it. In this way, the moral life tells us who this god is and allows us to discover it is the same God as the God whose morality is followed by Judaism. An even more principled reading of Meiri suggests there are core components that constitute a religion—a basic recognition of God and a fundamental moral way of living, contributing to the overall elevation and transformation of the human person towards higher spiritual ideals (Katz 1961; Halbertal 2000).

Meiri would seem to provide an excellent foundation for recognizing Hinduism, not simply as beyond the charges of *avoda zarah* but also as a religion—that is, a method and process that achieves the goals and purposes common to all religions. Because Meiri is less often cited by later authorities than the previous option of permissibility of *Shituf* and because there have been so few attempts to articulate a Jewish view of Hinduism, we cannot identify a contemporary rabbinic discussion that applies Meiri's view to a consideration of Hinduism.

Nevertheless, within the framework of the Hindu-Jewish dialogue one prominent rabbi, Rabbi David Rosen, has made the appeal to Meiri as a means of validating Hinduism.

The moral argument is not entirely problem-free. While at face value Hinduism certainly upholds a moral life, and grounds it in a broader understanding of life and its relationship to the divine, how this grounding is achieved is particular to the Hindu philosophical approach and may be at odds with the revelation-based model that informs Meiri. More seriously, Hindu religious life includes various phenomena that may not match up to the ideals of morality known to Meiri, or to Abrahamic faiths as a whole. Here we come up against the difficulty of passing verdict on a large entity as broad and complex as Hinduism, both when considered across ages and when viewed in its contemporary diversity. To take one pointed example, might some tantric practices be at odds with a conventional Jewish morality? Might there be other practices, either involving ritualized sexual activity or in other ways at odds with Jewish morality, that might lead us to question the applicability of Meiri's principles? And even if that were the case, what would it reflect on? Would it reflect on "Hinduism" or on a more limited set of practices? While these questions do require further elaboration, as Jews develop a more nuanced appreciation of Hinduism, it does seem that Meiri's approach is very promising for developing a genuine pluralistic attitude that cuts through many of the typical objections that Jews might have to Hinduism, its forms of worship and view of God.

G. Leadership summits and declarations—achievements and challenges

The twenty-first century saw two unique summits between Hindu and Jewish religious leaders. The first was held in Delhi in 2007 and the second in Jerusalem in 2008. The summits were organized by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, with the encouragement and facilitation of the Israeli foreign office, and the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha, a recently formed body that brings together the heads of many of India's leading schools and religious groups in an effort to develop a united Hindu voice on theoretical and public issues. The driving force behind these encounters was Swami Dayananda, who also founded the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha. In his quest to preserve Hindu identity, especially in the face of Christian proselytism, he was led to forge a partnership with Jewish leadership, perceiving deep commonalities between these two religions, especially with regard to their non-missionary nature and their common need to defend themselves against assaults on their integrity.

Before presenting the declarations of both summits, we should recognize the obvious and objective facts that may be more important than whatever was said, or not said, during those summits. The summits were a milestone in the very fact that they took place. They brought together high-ranking representatives of both religions who are recognized and who lent the summits a high degree of representativity, hence legitimacy. Perhaps even more significant than the fact that the summits took place is the fact that they took place in a way that was reciprocal,

even if dissemination and follow-up to the meeting lacked reciprocity (being stronger on the Hindu side).

Following is the text of the Delhi summit's concluding declaration:

The participants affirmed that:

1. Their respective traditions teach Faith in One Supreme Being who is the Ultimate Reality, who has created this world in its blessed diversity and who has communicated Divine ways of action for humanity for different peoples in different times and places.
2. The religious identities of both Jewish and Hindu communities are related to components of Faith, Scripture, Peoplehood, Culture, Religious Practices, Land and Language.
3. Hindus and Jews seek to maintain their respective heritage and pass it on to the succeeding generations, while living in respectful relations with other communities.
4. Neither seeks to proselytize, nor undermine or replace in any way the religious identities of other faith communities. They expect other communities to respect their religious identities and commitments, and condemn all activities that go against the sanctity of this mutual respect. Both the Hindu and Jewish traditions affirm the sanctity of life and aspire for a society in which all live in peace and harmony with one another. Accordingly they condemn all acts of violence in the name of any religion or against any religion.
5. The Jewish and Hindu communities are committed to the ancient traditions of Judaism and Hindu Dharma respectively, and have both, in their own ways, gone through the painful experiences of persecution, oppression and destruction. Therefore, they realize the need to educate the present and succeeding generations about their past, in order that they will make right efforts to promote religious harmony.
6. The representatives of the two faith communities recognize the need for understanding one another in terms of lifestyles, philosophy, religious symbols, culture, etc. They also recognize that they have to make themselves understood by other faith communities. They hope that through their bilateral initiatives, these needs would be met.
7. Because both traditions affirm the central importance of social responsibility for their societies and for the collective good of humanity, the participants pledged themselves to work together to help address the challenges of poverty, sickness and inequitable distribution of resources.

The areas of agreement can be divided into three categories: faith, identity and common action. Clause 1 discusses faith. It is the only clause to do so, and therefore should be seen as the condition that allows the other conclusions to follow. Clause 7 speaks of common action. Clauses 2–6 can be classified as expressing concerns on matters of identity. The core of the statement in terms of structure corresponds to its conceptual focus—identity. This emphasis is fully in accordance with the vision and purpose that led to the summit.

Clause 1 relies on the strategy of commonality as a basis for relationship and collaboration. This strategy informs the entire project, and we have to simply take note of the elements that were chosen to express this commonality. The most important one is the affirmation of faith in a supreme being who is creator and who communicates religious paths to different parts of humanity. Concerning this common ground of faith, we learn of the supreme being in two contexts—creation and revelation, or a milder form of it. Clause 1 says “communicated ways.” This may be a little less than “revelation” as understood in Judaism, and therefore an attempt to find common ground by using this phrase. Formulators of this statement are able to overlook nuances in Hindu understanding of creation or revelation in order to feature the fundamental commonalities they recognize between Judaism and Hinduism.

What the statement is really concerned about is identity. Clause 2 makes no meaningful point, other than to direct our attention to the domain of identity as central to religion, which however is quite a novelty in the realm of interfaith declarations. Clause 3, framed in terms of heritage, continues to address identitarian concerns, but affirming the interest of both groups to pass their tradition from generation to generation. Clause 4 identifies the common “enemy,” attempts at proselytization that undermine identity and the propagation of the religions. Judaism and Hinduism, both non-missionary religions, share the concerns for the stability of their community’s identity, in the face of threats from the outside.

The second part of Clause 4 seems slightly out of context and breaks the identitarian flow. As the central clause in the statement, it comes midway and expresses the peak expectations of the two communities. What is most important for the Hindus is the battle against proselytization. What is most important for the Jews is condemnation of violence. Hindus become partners in the ongoing attempt to fight terror and extremism through the medium of interreligious relations. Clauses 5 and 6 take the identitarian concerns into the domain of education. Commonality of historical suffering (victimhood) is coupled with commonality of commitment to one’s tradition. Both point to the importance of education within and making oneself understood outside. Education and better understanding by the other thus serve the mutual interest of both communities in successful propagation and continuity of their respective traditions.

An analysis of the real interests of the declaration thus suggests that preservation of identity, especially within the broader interreligious context, lies at its core. This allows us to identify what seems to me the most glaring omission, on the Jewish side, an omission that is a true failure of leadership and one that raises serious questions concerning the dialogue and its significance for the Jewish community. The statement focuses on issues of identity and expresses particular concern for the propagation of the faith within, in the face of encounters with other religions that would undermine identity and affiliation. It is formulated in India and signed by the Chief Rabbi of Israel. At the same time, literally tens of thousands of Israelis in India are exposed to Indian spiritual heritage. Jewish leadership has nothing to say about this! The real, on-the-ground encounter with Hinduism seems to be completely divorced from these declarations of identity and adherence to religion.

The ground covered by the second declaration, Jerusalem 2008, is basically the same as that covered by the first. Its emphases are largely the same, as are the

gaps and the issues that the declaration fails to address. Some novelties are introduced that can be classified under the rubric of clearing up misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Hinduism. These include reference to the Aryan invasion and the meaning of the swastika.

The second clause of the Jerusalem declaration is for many observers the most radical and most important clause in the declaration.

It is recognized that the One Supreme Being, both in its formless and manifest aspects, has been worshipped by Hindus over the millennia. This does not mean that Hindus worship “gods” and “idols”. The Hindu relates only to only to the One Supreme Being when he/she prays to a particular manifestation.

The first declaration already affirmed belief in one supreme being. The second declaration takes this a step further. It clarifies that Hindus do not worship gods or idols, and that they worship the supreme being alone. Hindu participants have taken great pride in this clause, and seen in it one of the major achievements of the summit. In an article in the *New Indian Express*, Swami Dayananda himself describes the meeting and its achievements:

The Jerusalem meet concluded with a landmark declaration that Hindus worship “one supreme being” and are not really idolatrous.

The implications of this are profound in content and far-reaching in effect. Judaism was born of the complete repudiation of idol-worship and the rabbinic literature abounds with denunciation of idolatry in an entire tractate of the Talmud devoted to this.

The importance of this issue in the Jewish and other Abrahamic traditions cannot be overstated. Since its first encounter with these religions, due to their incomplete understanding of its Sastras, Hinduism has been perceived by them as idolatrous and promoting many gods, says Swami Dayananda Saraswathi.

The Hindus have, for centuries, experienced the extremely violent consequences of this wrong perception.

The historic declaration made at the Hindu-Jewish Summit at Jerusalem on 18 February, 2008 sets at rest the wrong notion that Hinduism is idolatrous...

The Jewish leaders, in so many words, owned their perception of the Hindu tradition as erroneous and came up with the declaration which the Hindu delegation could happily accept. This establishes that honest and bold dialogue can completely reverse wrong views and erroneous perceptions held over millennia.

It emphasises that leaders of every religion need to be informed about the basics, vision and beliefs of other religious traditions, says Swami Dayananda Saraswathi. (*New Indian Express*, March 9, 2008)

Swami Dayananda presents Clause 2 as the great achievement of the meeting. He recognizes that it goes to the core of the Jewish-Hindu relationship and

considers that it sufficiently addresses the problem. It puts to rest the charges that Hindus are idolatrous. Whether the summit really achieved what Swami Dayananda claims it did is to a certain extent a matter of expectations and definitions. To the extent that the purpose of the summit was to clear up misunderstandings and improve perception of Hindus, he is probably right. Proceedings of the meeting do suggest a change in perception and better understanding. The statement does have the potential to redress perceptions. The Jewish perception, however, may not be identical to that expressed by Swami Dayananda. The rabbis never affirmed Hinduism as not *avoda zarah* or that Jews and Hindus worshipped the “same God.” Recognition of the same one supreme being is not necessarily the same as affirming that Judaism and Hinduism believe in the same God. The overlap between the two statements is partial, and identifying them is misleading. Even if one recognizes that Jews and Hindus worship the same God, this does not necessarily mean that the problem of *avoda zarah* is resolved. Therefore, even if one accepts that Jews and Hindus believe in the same God, this does not necessarily resolve the problem of *avoda zarah*. What is at stake is precisely the distinction between the Hindu concerns—explaining the nature of their faith, and the Jewish concerns—applying the category of *avoda zarah*. Success in the former cannot automatically be translated into success in the latter.

The gap between how the meeting is viewed by its initiator and how I suggest members of the rabbinate would actually view it is a sign of the gaps in perspective and the asymmetry in the expectations and importance attributed to the meeting. This was primarily a meeting for Hindus, serving a largely Hindu agenda. This fact is reflected in the afterlife of the meeting and in the attention it received in the press and on the internet. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel never went public with the meeting, and its constituency was not made aware of either the real or the imagined breakthroughs of the meeting. The declaration was neither translated into Hebrew nor posted to its website. Within the Jewish community, its impact was limited to a small number of specialists who are interested in Jewish-Hindu relations or in interreligious relations in general. On the Hindu side, we find both declarations posted to the Hindu Dharma site and receiving significant attention from the press.

Diplomatic meetings are not the stuff of religious discourse, but they do provide important symbols and they can launch important movements. Declarations stand outside traditional Jewish discourse and therefore have little impact within traditional Jewish circles and institutions. At the same time, the meetings provide important symbols, and these can help drive other processes. The great emphasis of both summits was on the need for continuing education. The importance and success of the summits should thus be weighed as much in terms of education as in terms of either diplomacy or theology. In educational terms, they provided an opportunity for participants on both sides to learn and helped dispel some important misunderstanding concerning Hinduism. They created resources, including statements, that are worthy of study. But above all, they created the drive and impetus for further study. One participant, Rabbi Daniel Sperber, has internalized the message of the summits and gone on to author a still unpublished work titled *The Halachic Status of Hinduism: Is Hinduism Idolatrous? A Jewish Legal Inquiry* (Sperber forthcoming). His

line of thinking conforms to how Hindus present Hinduism and therefore removes Hinduism from the pale of *avoda zarah*.

H. Judaism and Hinduism: the future of a relationship

Reflecting on the future of a relationship grows out of description of past and present. However, where the descriptive task relies on data—whether scholarly research or historical and sociological data—reflection on the future of a relationship draws on two forces: (a) identification of existing or established patterns and extending them to a view of the future; and (b) a vision of the future that is expressive of the worldview and values of the person undertaking the reflection. Future-oriented reflections are perforce more subjective and say as much about the author as they do about the imagined future of a field.

Based on the above description, I would like to suggest three broad areas for the advancement of mutual knowledge and the relationship of Judaism and Hinduism. Each of these is broken down further into sub-areas. The three broad areas are reciprocity, commonality and challenges to the relationship.

Reciprocity

Can we speak of reciprocity in mutual religious recognition? The following talking points suggest several difficulties in this regard.

1. Reciprocity of recognition as a distinct religion. Jews for the most part are aware of the fact that there is a religious tradition(s) that is particular to India and that is commonly referred to as Hinduism. Jews are accustomed to being recognized as a distinct faith community, following two millennia of living in the shadow of Christianity and Islam. It may therefore come as a surprise to learn that in many ways, Judaism is not fully recognized in Indian public consciousness as a distinct religious tradition. With the improvement in political relations and the high adulation that Israel enjoys in popular Indian culture, this is slowly changing. However, the very issue of knowing Judaism's distinctiveness and recognizing it as such is still one that must be addressed.
2. Reciprocity of interest. Perhaps as an extension of the previous point, one notes a lack of reciprocity in mutual interest. Israelis are fascinated by Indian culture. Israeli literature features India as a site for reflection and imagination for the better part of the twentieth century. Opening the gates of India through diplomatic relations has led to a flood of Israeli visitors to India. Even if many of them go there for circumstantial reasons, there is a significant attraction to India that finds expression in mass travel. No parallel process exists. Indian travel to Israel is limited to business and study (and for Christians for pilgrimage as well). There is no parallel fascination with Jewish or Israeli culture.
3. Reciprocity of mutual learning. As a consequence of the previous two points, we note total lack of reciprocity in academic studies. Indian studies and the study

of Hinduism have a place in just about all major Israeli universities. By contrast, there is not a single chair in Judaism in the entire subcontinent. In introducing a book called *Karmic Passages*, a work that features the academic achievements of Israeli academics on things Indian, then Indian ambassador to Israel, Arun Singh, notes that Israel is probably the only country in the world where academic studies are the follow-up to in-person exposure to Indian culture, experienced by Israelis through their travels. There is no similar tradition of Hindus visiting Israel which would provide feeders for the academy. Thus, lack of reciprocity extends to academic study, teaching and research. India is important for Israeli intellectual life. The reverse is not true.

Commonality

Within the context of world religions, several suggestions have been made for fundamental similarities between Judaism and Hinduism. One scholar of religion, Barbara Holdrege, has suggested several features that make these two communities similar—learning-based, emphasizing action over belief (orthopraxy), embodiment in an ethnic community and being non-missionary (Holdrege 1999). In reflecting on the future of the relationship, the following points come to mind.

4. Commonality of foundational teachings. While all religions share in fundamental moral teachings (consider the emblematic golden rule), there are teachings of greater specificity that are shared between some traditions and not others. This has been explored in the emerging field of Hindu-Judaism studies, and the most recent contributions of Theodor and Greenberg (2018), as well as the book-length reflections of Brill (2020), further demonstrate the great promise in this area of study. We are, however, still at an early stage of study and discovery of such commonalities. More specifically, the field has yet to establish how much of what we find is due to historical influence and how much is an expression of commonalities in the spiritual life and in spiritual experience. Idel (1988) has surmised that Hinduism has played a significant role in the evolution of Kabbalah. Much work remains to be done in establishing the scope and nature of parallels in teaching between the religions or sub-traditions within them.
5. The centrality of spirituality. Swami Vivekananda famously contrasted spiritual India with the material West (Goshen-Gottstein 2016a, 63). For many this rings true. One might consider the rush of Israelis to India as partly justifying this view. Yet it must be reconsidered in the present context. Is Judaism part of the West? Can it really be presented as materialist? And for that matter, can India today really be presented as “spiritual”? The shock of the first-time visitor to India, who comes with some spiritual expectation and discovers the “real” India, suggests the opposite.

There is a more balanced way of relating to spirituality. Israel and India are ancient cultures for whom the spiritual and religious life are central. This centrality has framed their history and has given birth to other religions that have spread beyond their geographic bounds (notably Christianity and Buddhism). Both continue to aspire to spiritual ideals. Both struggle to realize the challenges of spirituality in the face of the challenges of today's world. Secularization, technology, exposure to external cultures and ideologies, the challenges of transmitting tradition—these challenges are common to both nations and both cultures. The encounter between these two religious cultures is a meeting point, on both sides, of classic spiritual aspirations and contemporary realities. This recognition opens the way to sharing survival strategies, educational lessons and a vision that could be common to both traditions.

6. The commonality of God. Can we go beyond affirmation of “spirituality” to affirmation of belief in a common God? This is one of the biggest challenges facing these two religious cultures. The discussions of the Chief Rabbinate and Hindu leaders was an important moment in the process. The process, however, is far from completed. Goshen-Gottstein (2016b) is a book-length attempt to engage the question. The question also comes up in significant ways in Theodor and Greenberg (2018) and in Brill (2020). Much more has to be done in order to affirm commonality of belief in God. These efforts involve Jewish theological reflection, research data among Hindu believers, consideration of educational initiatives on the Hindu side, and above all much more sharing and dialogue. Cultures that have been estranged for millennia cannot close gaps in understanding in a matter of years, or even decades.

Funding Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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