



Confronting the Challenge of Idolatory: Response to Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god*

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Abstract

A critical analysis of some important issues raised by Goshen-Gottstein's book. The author argues that the most fruitful avenue for a Jewish approach to Hinduism is by using the concept of *shituf*. This means that for Jews, all use of statues, images, and speaking about “gods” is forbidden. However, for non-Jews, this would remain a permitted form of worship as long as the various gods are seen as manifestations of the one true God.

Keywords Judaism · Hinduism

Introduction

Alon Goshen-Gottstein's book, *Same God, Other god: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry*, is a challenging work that all can read with profit. It was particularly valuable to me as I read it shortly before my first visit to India. Walking through the streets of old Varanasi (Benares), where there are temples and small shrines on every street, helped focus my mind on the important issues he discusses.¹

Let me begin by calling attention to a very significant point Goshen-Gottstein discusses right at the beginning, a crucial point in my opinion. In the first chapter, which is titled “The Sheitl Crisis,”² Goshen-Gottstein notes that Jewish evaluations of Hinduism, which were expressed as part of halachic rulings in the so-called sheitl controversy, were made without any detailed knowledge of Hinduism. The halachists treat Hinduism as an abstraction, much like they do Christianity. It is true that we do not have much in the way of halachic discussions of Hinduism, but we do

¹ This essay preserves the oral form in which it was delivered.

² The controversy revolved around sheitls produced from the hair that people cut off before visiting a Hindu temple in Tirupati, India. Was this hair to be regarded as an idolatrous offering and thus forbidden to be used for sheitls?

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have a lot focused on Christianity, and as the world gets smaller, and Jews and Hindus interact more, you can expect to see more discussions about Hinduism.

Yet even just referring to the sheitl controversy, I find it strange that judgments were offered about Hinduism based solely on book knowledge, without ever having spoken to scholars and clergymen, that is, without having ever confronted the religion as a living religion. There is something deeply troubling about halachic authorities discussing whether Hinduism is *avodah zarah* without attempting to learn from Hindus how they understand their faith, as well as how their faith has impacted their lives. I would think that this narrative, attesting as it does to the importance of faith, must also be part of any Jewish evaluation of Hinduism.

Goshen-Gottstein also notes an even more serious problem, namely, “Who speaks for Hinduism?” When discussing Hinduism, should it be judged by its intellectual elites or by its masses, who will often have very different understandings of the religion? I confess that I thought a lot about this, especially while walking around Varanasi.

On the one hand, textbooks on Hinduism will say that it is a monotheistic religion, and that is what I have always been told by Hindus in the West. All the gods are simply manifestations of the one God. Yet when I was in India I asked people about this, and the answer I got, including from college-educated people, is that they worship different gods and these gods are separate entities. I specifically asked if all the gods are really fundamentally one, and was told, “No.” With adherents of Hinduism holding vastly different understandings, how does one evaluate such a religion?

I have found only one discussion in halachic literature that discusses this matter, and that is with reference to the sheitl controversy.³ Rabbi Menasheh Klein records that he spoke to Rabbi Aharon David Dunner about this matter and told him that the Hindu priests deny that cutting the hair has any connection to idolatrous offerings. Dunner was the one sent by R. Joseph Shalom Elyashiv to India to investigate the sheitl problem at the source, and it was his report, speaking of Indian hair being offered to a god as part of an idolatrous ritual, that led Elyashiv to ban sheitls with Indian hair. Dunner replied to Klein that he knows what the priests say, and he also examined unnamed Hindu theological texts. So why, then, did he conclude that the haircutting is part of an idolatrous ceremony? He claims that the non-idolatrous understanding is expressed by Hindu priests because they are embarrassed by what the masses think. That is, the priests offer logical reasons for the idolatrous practices to make them seem as if they have nothing to do with idolatry.

Klein replies with a very different approach. He claims that when seeking to discover the meaning of a practice it is the priests who should be asked and relied upon. Since when they were asked they denied that cutting the hair has any connection to offerings to idolatry, and this is also what appears in their books, this should be sufficient. Klein claims that the masses follow their religious leaders, so it is the testimony of the priests and the scholars that is authoritative. Klein also cites Talmudic

³ Klein, 2015, no. 115, pp. 203ff. For numerous other responsa dealing with the sheitl controversy, see <http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~spotter/sheitl/>

sources which he says support his notion that it is the views of the religious leaders which are determinative when it comes to evaluating a religion.

This is a matter that we can leave for the halachic authorities. Yet I must say that in opposition to Klein, I can see why many might not regard priests' evaluation as the end of the matter. After all, since when is Jewish law interested in determining the status of a religious ritual in an abstract way? There is no question that as far as the priests are concerned the ritual is without any element of *avodah zarah*. However, if the masses think that the haircutting has an idolatrous component—I don't know if they actually think so—one can ask why it matters what the priests say. If the masses believe this, then their religion, meaning how they understand the ritual, is indeed connected with *avodah zarah*. Is there any halachic justification for saying that because John Doe belongs to religion X, and religion X officially does not sanction idolatry, that if John Doe performs an action with idolatrous intent that it is not to be regarded as idolatry because the religion officially does not sanction this? This only goes to show how difficult it is for one to speak of the "authentic" expression of a religion, and to use such an understanding to reach broad halachic conclusions.

Take Judaism for example. If a group of people bow before the holy ark and thinks that God dwells in it and His essence is distributed among the Torah scrolls, there is no question that this would be *avodah zarah*. It does not matter if one claims that this is not what "official" Judaism teaches according to its religious leadership. All that matters is what the practitioners say, and this then becomes a question of determining the reality, what in yeshivot is termed "the *metziut*."

Now let me turn to Goshen-Gottstein's book, *Same God, Other God*. The book's great advantage is immediately apparent. This is a book written by someone who has spent a good deal of time studying Hinduism. Furthermore, he does not merely know it as book knowledge but has studied under Hindu thinkers and has closely observed Hindu ritual. Thus, Goshen-Gottstein is in a perfect position to offer an evaluation of Hinduism from a Jewish perspective, and to correct errors that have been made in earlier evaluations.

As part of his ambitious agenda, Goshen-Gottstein wants to bring Jews to an appreciation of Hinduism, to show that in some ways it is similar to Judaism, and that it should not be regarded as akin to classic *avodah zarah*, despite what certainly looks like idolatry at first glance. In other words, there is an activist agenda to the book. In fact, it is not just Hinduism that he is concerned with. Goshen-Gottstein wants us to rethink the very category of *avodah zarah*, and this is in line with his view that there needs to be a contemporary Jewish theology of religions.

Important, indeed crucial, for Goshen-Gottstein's argument is that Hindus worship the same God as Jews. As such, their rituals are to be seen in a different light than rituals of *avodah zarah*. Of course, the elephant in the room is the multiple Hindu deities and the worship of idols. Is not the worship of idols clearly *avodah zarah*? I was surprised that in the book there is no mention of the fact that the Chief Rabbinate of Israel has made Goshen-Gottstein's efforts much easier. After a groundbreaking interfaith gathering between representatives of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and Hindu leaders, a lengthy declaration was issued. The first paragraph reads as follows: "Their [Jewish and Hindu] 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.”

By signing this declaration, the Jewish participants were agreeing that Hinduism is monotheistic and that Hindus have also been the recipients of some sort of revelation from God. As mentioned, I was surprised that there is no mention of this in *Same God, Other God*. Then I read Goshen-Gottstein’s other book, *The Jewish Encounter With Hinduism: Wisdom, Spirituality, Identity*, also published in 2016. Here he does take up the declaration, and from what he writes I think I understand why there is no mention of it in *Same God, Other God*. Goshen-Gottstein writes that “the theological, let alone halachic, implications of this opening clause should be taken with a grain of salt” (188). In other words, the Jewish signatories never intended their words to be taken literally, and the declaration is to be seen like other such apologetic statements which people on the inside know are only for outward consumption. Or perhaps Goshen-Gottstein means that the rabbis who signed the declaration were not completely aware of its theological significance.

However you evaluate the matter, since Goshen-Gottstein thinks that the people who signed the declaration do not draw from it any practical halachic ramifications, it obviously is of no use for him. Just as an aside, let me say that we are at a pretty pathetic place if it is true that a formal declaration signed after an official interfaith gathering cannot be relied on to express the views of the signatories. Yet even if the representatives of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate do not really accept the claims in the document they signed, Goshen-Gottstein does want to move in that direction, but how to do so?

Same God, Other God is such a rich book that I cannot discuss all of Goshen-Gottstein’s major arguments, but let me call attention to a couple of them. Chapter 10 is entitled “Thinking of Hinduism in Light of Meiri.” R. Menahem Meiri’s position on religious tolerance, if you can call it that, has assumed enormous significance in the Modern Orthodox world. For many, Meiri’s position intuitively seems not only correct but the only moral option in dealing with other religions. Not for naught does Goshen-Gottstein write in the first sentence of chapter 10 that “The Middle Ages have bequeathed us an additional major resource for developing a theology of other religions. In many ways it is the most promising and most helpful resource, because it deals directly with the question of the status of contemporary religions.”

Even though there is more than one way to read Meiri, I do not think that there can be any doubt that by the same way Meiri separates Christianity from the idolatry of old, so too his approach can do the same thing with Hinduism. He specifically distinguishes between idolaters on the one hand, and those who “worship the divinity, in whatever form, even if their belief is far from our belief.” (Meiri, 1971, 330). Certainly, Hinduism falls into the category of “worshipping the divinity.”⁴

It is not entirely clear how Meiri understands the Talmudic passages that deal with idolatry. One might be inclined to say that Meiri distinguishes between idolatry

⁴ See also Meiri, 1966, 67, where he refers to idolaters who are not bound by any religion.

and idolaters. In other words, Christianity and Hinduism teach a system of morality so their adherents are not regarded as idolaters, the defining characteristic of which for Meiri is immoral behavior. However, from a theological standpoint, the religions of Christianity and Hinduism would remain religions of idolatry.

The problem with such an interpretation is that this is not what Meiri seems to be saying. He seems to be saying that the people of his day, who live good lives and recognize divinity, are by definition not engaged in idolatry. If this is what Meiri holds, it creates its own problem, because what then are we to say about martyrdom? If these religions are not religions of idolatry because they encourage moral behavior, then given the choice between martyrdom or conversion to Christianity or Hinduism, martyrdom would not be halachically required. Yet based on everything I know, it is impossible to imagine that a medieval Talmudist like Meiri really thought that the halachah does not require martyrdom when faced with the choice of conversion to Christianity (or Hinduism) or death.

Can one claim that Meiri believes that Jews are required to have a “pure” understanding of God while non-Jews are permitted to understand God in ways that would be regarded as *avodah zarah* for Jews? I think not, as this is bringing in the notion of non-Jews not being obligated in *shituf* (associating God with another being), a view held by many later halachic authorities. Yet there is no evidence of such a concept in Meiri, and it is indeed anachronistic to speak of it with regard to him, as the notion of *shituf* is a later development.⁵

I also want to say something about Goshen-Gottstein’s treatment of Maimonides’ understanding of *avodah zarah*, in particular Maimonides’ view of Christianity. This is important because if Maimonides regards Christianity as *avodah zarah*, then, as Goshen-Gottstein correctly states, he would also regard Hinduism as *avodah zarah*. According to Goshen-Gottstein, Maimonides sees it as self-evident that Christianity is *avodah zarah*, yet Goshen-Gottstein is unsure why this is so. He writes: “Cultural distance, reliance on tradition, and an intuitive sense of otherness may have all played a far more important role in his ruling than either theology or an analysis of foreign patterns of worship” (57).

I have to say that this understanding of Maimonides is overly complicating matters, and for Goshen-Gottstein to reach his goal of a new halachic perspective on Hinduism, Maimonides’ approach needs to be put aside, as it in no way can offer any support in this area. Why did Maimonides regard Christianity as *avodah zarah*? We do not even need to look at the theological complexities of the Trinity, that is, God as three different “persons” and the consequent denial of God’s unity, to locate the *avodah zarah* from Maimonides’ perspective. Of course, Maimonides regarded this as *avodah zarah*,⁶ but we do not need to go there.

⁵ I accept the view of Jacob Katz, Louis Jacobs, and David Berger that it is a mistake to attribute to the tosafists the notion that *shituf* is a permissible theological outlook for non-Jews. See Katz, 1961, 163; Jacobs, 2000, 82 n. 12; Berger, 2015, 135 n. 31.

⁶ He refers to the Trinity at the beginning of his Letter on Resurrection and in *Guide* 1:50. R. Saadiah Gaon earlier discussed the Trinity in *Emunot ve-deot* 2:5.

For Maimonides, and I daresay all medieval Jewish writers, the fundamental aspect of *avodah zarah* in Christianity is the worship of a man as God. What could be more idolatrous than worshipping a man believing he is God? Goshen-Gottstein writes that “Perhaps he [Maimonides] did not realize that Jesus is worshipped as God, rather than as a human being” (217 n. 16). I do not know what it means to worship someone “as a human being.” Yet we can leave this aside, as Maimonides knew full well that Jesus was worshiped as God, and he indeed refers to Christians as “worshipping a god other than the Lord” (*Mishneh torah, hilkhoh melakhim* 11:4). This is reason enough for him to regard Christianity as *avodah zarah*. As far as Maimonides is concerned, there is no possibility of God incarnating Himself, since by definition this is impossible. Therefore, any human worshiped as God is really just worship of a man, not worship of God in an inappropriate way.

In my initial thoughts on the subject I focused on the position of R. Abraham ben David (Rabad) that, contrary to Maimonides, it is not heresy to believe that God, the object of one’s worship, has a physical form (Comment to *Mishneh torah, hilkhoh teshuvah* 3:7). Based on this, I thought that if one affirmed that God assumed physical form as a particular person, and then one worshiped this person as God, that this should not be regarded as idolatry according to Rabad.⁷ After all, Christians are not worshipping “other gods.” Rather, they are worshipping God, even if they are mistaken in assuming that He incarnated himself. This approach would also have great relevance to the issue of Hinduism and *avodah zarah*.

The problem is that there is no doubt that Rabad *did* regard Christianity as *avodah zarah*, as he thought that the worship of Jesus is worship of a man, what we might call a “foreign god.” In fact, Rabad’s view is really not relevant to the matter we are discussing.⁸ The reason is because, while Rabad does not regard one as a heretic if he thinks that God has a physical form, this is not the same as actually identifying a real physical object with God. If we are to assume that even the latter is acceptable according to Rabad, then we would be forced to the absurd conclusion that Rabad would allow one to worship the sun or a tree if he believed that the sun or tree is God. David Berger put the matter as follows in correspondence with me: “The corporealists [whom Rabad exonerates from heresy] worships God but imagines that He has a characteristic that He doesn’t really have. The tree worshipper worships the tree, which he mistakenly believes is God.” While Rabad is tolerant of the former, the latter is the epitome of idolatry. Rabad’s position is therefore not of any use for those who want to find room for a halachic acceptance of Christianity or Hinduism.

In chapter 11, Goshen-Gottstein tackles the problem of whether Jews and Hindus worship the same God, and how this can be established. He points to things like creation, healing, purity, holiness, and miracles which support a religious commonality that can justify the affirmation of a common God. In his words, “[I]f a religion can bring one to a real experience of God, one that can be somehow recognized by its fruits, the God at its center must be recognized as God, the same God known in our tradition” (144–145). Yet I do not know how important the notion of the “same God” is. From a halachic standpoint, in

⁷ This point was earlier stated by the sixteenth-century R. Solomon Modena. See Ruderman, 1979, 264, 270. As pointed out to me by Dr. David Berger, Joseph S. Bloch also cites this passage in Rabad to argue that Christianity is not *avodah zarah*. See Bloch, 1927, 44–45.

⁸ I thank Dr. David Berger for enlightening me in this matter.

order for non-Jews to remove themselves from *avodah zarah*, I think it is enough for them to believe in one God, even if this God is very different from the “Jewish God.” I say this a bit tongue in cheek, for I do not know how one would even define the Jewish God, as, for example, the God of Maimonides is very different from the God of R. Isaac Luria.

In the end, I think the most fruitful avenue for a Jewish approach to Hinduism is by using the concept of *shituf*, and treating Hinduism as it is understood by its intellectuals, namely, that all the gods are manifestations of one divine power. This would entail rejecting my earlier hesitations about judging a religion based solely on how its most enlightened practitioners understand it. In line with this approach, when it comes to Jews, all use of statues, images, and speaking about “gods” is forbidden. However, for non-Jews these things are elements of a permitted form of worship as long as the various gods are seen as manifestations of the one true God. Goshen-Gottstein discusses image worship and its problematics from a Jewish perspective. But once *shituf* is allowed, I do not think images would be halachically problematic as part of non-Jewish worship. If I am right about this, then Jews need not have an automatic aversion towards the ubiquitous images in Hinduism, thus opening the door to a more constructive Jewish–Hindu theological dialogue.

I do not see the matter of Hinduism as presenting any more significant theological challenges than Christianity. If Christianity is exempted from the charge of *avodah zarah* because it is regarded as *shituf*, then many forms of Hinduism can also be placed into this category. While this is my opinion, it remains to be seen whether halachists will also conclude as such. My hope is that any halachic authority who deals with Hinduism will make use of Goshen-Gottstein’s book, which for many years will be remembered as the first real discussion of Hinduism from a halachic and Jewish theological perspective.

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