REVIEW ESSAY

LIVING ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN JUDAISM AND HINDUISM/BUDDHISM

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Judith Linzer, *Torah and Dharma: Jewish Seekers in Eastern Religions* (New York, London, Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1996), xxv+367 pages.

Judith Linzer's *Torah and Dharma* gives us an in-depth understanding of a significant contemporary phenomenon which will speak to a wide spectrum of Jews and to many non-Jewish seekers and scholars. It is a unique combination of a phenomenological study of many different types of religiously East-West Jews with a broad personal preface, and a 100-page section on"Jewish-Buddhist Encounter"—a jewel in its own right which continues the personal-dialogical form of the rest of the book.

A meaningful thread through the whole book is the growth and development of Judith Linzer herself—from an ethnic, non-religious Jewish childhood to years of work with Zen and yoga, followed by her emergence as a spokesperson and witness for Jewish renewal, Jewish feminism, and the finest kind of openness to the dialogue of "touchstones of reality" that is the real heart of her book. (See Linzer, p. 233)

Jews who go East find other Jews too. They also may find, as I did when Swami Yatiswarananda gave me a copy of Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Eastern teachers who tell them to explore their own roots. Many Jewish seekers have found Judaism illuminated when they were practicing one Eastern religion or another. In particular they come to look at Judaism with a spiritual and mystical orientation for which nothing in their Jewish upbringing may have prepared them. Some have remained Buddhist while trying to understand Judaism better. Others have returned to a new, more mystical Judaism, whether Hasidic and Orthodox or Neo-Hasidic and "Jewish Renewal."

One seeker discovered the "Divine Mother" at Sri Aurobindo's ashram to be originally an Egyptian Jewess from France, who had studied with a kabbalist who created the symbol of the Star of David with a lotus in it that has become the logo for the ashram! All this, of course, inevitably entails some syncretism.

Torah and Dharma may be characterized as a practical workshop in Indo-Judaic studies as opposed to the theoretical and academic comparisons and contrasts which one usually finds. Some seekers found that their *zazen* brought up deep Jewish feelings and concluded that their "Zen practice" was Orthodox Judaism. One seeker went from Orthodox Judaism to Hinduism to a Sufi

teacher who helped him develop an intuitive understanding of Torah, hence again a combination of Judaism and an Eastern religion.

Two Jewish seekers, who were married to each other and who had become Zen Buddhist priests, later incorporated the observance of Jewish holidays and the Sabbath into the "practice" at the Zen center. They had to "leave" Judaism to "become sufficiently developed" so that they would be able to find that thread or missing link where the real, live tradition of Judaism had been broken. Only then did they intuitively understand Torah and *mitzvot*. Others similarly had to practice one or another form of Yoga to discover that Judaism is a valid spiritual path, the depth, power, and profundity of which Jews today have difficulty tapping into.

Many of these seekers felt they had to return to Orthodoxy after their Eastern religion because it seemed to them to be a real religious practice that makes for spirituality and God-consciousness. On the other hand, some contrasted the physical and aesthetic environment of the *shul* unfavorably with the ashram. One seeker complained that Judaism told her what kind of person to be but did not give her the tools to actualize it as did Zen.

Judith Linzer quotes me as valuing in Hasidism precisely what is *not* merely spiritual. "Hasidism . . . was concerned about hallowing the everyday, sanctifying the profane, and about real community life, and not just individual spirituality" (p. 188). A moving witness that may be placed in opposition to my own is that of a woman who asserts that as a result of her years of Zen practice her Judaism and her entire life "have become more vivid, meaningful, rich, and alive":

> Without my Zen practice, I would never have had the strength to endure the incredible loneliness I've experienced doing Jewish practice all these years. Needless to say, as a single mother, or single woman in the traditional Jewish community, there is little understanding or true kindness or acceptance available. This is the opposite of the zendo, and this is where the great need of Zen mindfulness towards others, and sensitivity, comes in. . . . 'My years of Zen practice have helped me live with myself, live with the world, be kinder, more caring, compassionate, fun-loving. It helps me forgive over and over. So, in that sense, Zen practice has helped me 'do Torah'.

The rest of her witness, however, is closer to my own:

> In Judaism, I appreciate the incredible beauty of *davening*, *Shabbos* and the emphasis upon family, children, love, life itself. Judaism is a pathway which encompasses everything.

> It includes one's whole life, season by season, and does not deny the joys of personal expression and achievement in the world. . . . When practiced mistakenly, the Eastern pathway can give rise to a withdrawal from life and separate a person from the society in which they presently live. . . . Zen practice fosters a fierce independence, strength, and ability to stand alone, and I love that. Judaism fosters a great deal of dependence upon community, relationships, and others.(p. 194 f.)

While this seeker says that in Zen one goes to the God within and in Judaism to a God outside one, another says that Zen practice isn't about inner life versus outer life. Judith Linzer comments that many Jewish seekers who have turned to Buddhism also emphasize that this inner-outer dichotomy does not exist in Buddhist thinking. I was struck by this statement since it is something that I have often emphasized in my own books, such as this formulation from my forthcoming work *The Road to Genuine Community*:

> Inner and outer are *not* primordial human reality but secondary elaborations and constructions arising from a human wholeness that precedes them both. Unless we understand this and understand the possibility of direct contact between whole human beings, we cannot understand the sphere of the between. The inner is psychic in the sense that we do not perceive anything with our senses, the outer physical in the sense that we do. And these divisions are useful for a certain ordering of our lives, such as the distinction between what we see, what we dream, what we envision, and what we hallucinate! Yet if we think about human existence in its wholeness, we realize that a true event in our lives is neither inner nor outer but takes up and claims the whole of us.

In the update of her earlier interview of me that Judith Linzer quotes are some statements particularly relevant to our theme of Indo-Judaic encounter and study:

> Once, after a lecture of mine on Hinduism, my wife asked me, "What touchstone of reality do you still retain from Hinduism?" My answer was that it gives a depth-dimension, which is always there for me even when I do not spell it out—a transpersonal consciousness, the reality of which I recognize, though not as the only reality. . . . I believe that the options which we choose and later reject are almost as important as

> the options we ultimately choose and make our own. They remain with us, like an obligato to the melody of our lives. (p. 204)

This does not mean, however, that that melody has not changed in essential ways since I was immersed in Hinduism:

> In contrast to what I held when I affirmed with the nondualist Hindu Vedantist that Brahman is Atman, I believe that human existence as we know it is not *maya*, or illusion, but genuine historical destiny. This destiny is not a divine plan or blueprint that we merely act out. On the contrary, we are given a real ground on which to stand, real freedom with which to act, real resources to praise, bless, thank, but also to contend with God. . . . (p. 204)

> There is no rung of human life that cannot be the ground of hallowing, no rung where we cannot put off the habitual and discover the wonder of the unique and the claim of the hour! We are constantly creating new religious forms as we respond to the spirit and are permeated by it, and we do so in faithful dialogue and tension with the spirit and form of tradition. "To be a spiritual heir, one must be a pioneer," writes Heschel, but he also says elsewhere, "To be worthy of being a pioneer, one must be a spiritual heir!" (p. 206)

Speaking of what Max Kadushin called "normal mysticism", and what I call "mysticism of the particular", the Buddhist Rev. Heng Sure picks up on the fact that "the Baal Shem is always talking about meeting God now and how the holy is not separate from this moment". He compares the joy of the observant Jew in doing the *mitzvot* with the Buddhist idea that your own mind is accessible to you if you cultivate it and practice. "You walk the path and, as you go, your mind gets purer and purer and the holy emerges, not from the outside, but because you are tuning in more and more. This spirituality becomes daily mysticism" (p. 255). Daniel Matt explains it as "the Rabbis' attempt to fashion a person's daily life in such a way that someone could continually become aware of God's presence". Normative within rabbinic Judaism, this notion got lost but was brought back by Hasidism, and it is also what people find in Eastern religions. Matt also makes a contrast between *devekut*—Jewish mystical union with God through attachment or cleaving—and Buddhist detachment.

Ram Dass similarly describes Judaism as being like karma yoga in which your life is your path and your job is to hallow that life through living fully.

Avram Davis sees the Jewish path as not only redeeming ourselves but also transforming the world: "The heart of what blessing is, is connection. That's very different from Buddhism, which is to disconnect. The heart of Judaism is attachment." (p. 266).

Judith Linzer herself takes this contrast further by stresssing the emphasis within contemporary Judaism on remembering the *Shoah*, the Holocaust. Avram Davis adds, "The Jewish people and the Jewish path are the oldest self-reflective continual tribe and path on earth" (p. 267). Judith Linzer sums this up:

> If one practices Buddhist meditation, one is encouraged to let go of the idea of personal history and people history and to be in the moment. If one views existence through Jewish eyes, one is encouraged to think of oneself, not just as an individual person, but as an entire four-thousand-year historical process and people. (p. 268)

Linzer agrees with Daniel Matt's statement that a "healthy spirituality might be to learn from both of these extreme poles". On the other hand, as a result of her years of Vipassana meditation, the psychologist Ronna Kabatznick wishes to see no distinction here:

> When you are a meditator, you see the Nazi within yourself. It's not that the Jews are one way and the Nazis are another way. We are all in the same pie. The human mind is filled with anger, greed, and delusion [the Buddhist three poisons]. The first of the four Noble Truths is that suffering exists for everyone. *It is a mistake to base our Jewish identity on suffering because it creates a sense of separation. Everyone suffers.* (p. 285)

Another balance that Judith Linzer puts before us is being committed to both the universal and the particular.

> One can be part of the Sangha and be a "good" Jew.... Sensei Helen Harkaslpi answered the question, "How can you be an observant Jew and a Zen priest?" [with] "Watch me and see." That's a good Zen, as well as Hasidic, answer. Watch how the rebbe ties his shoelaces and watch the Zen master make tea. (p. 273)

For a great many years I have stressed the crucial difference between that which is merely "different" and that which is "unique". I am delighted to find Marc Lieberman making the identical distinction in this book, and with it

recognizing the true meaning of the "chosenness" of the Jewish people: "If one recognizes our uniqueness, that allows us to look around and see the uniqueness of our fellow human beings and our fellow human groupings" (p. 274). In the same vein, Moshe Walkos suggests that "the Jewish renewal movement is beginning to sing the *Kiddush* this way: 'You have chosen us with [instead of *from*] all of the nations of the world.' (p. 274) Moshe Waldoks also recognizes that the Buddhist major teaching of living in the moment is a Jewish teaching too, and cites Ram Dass' famous book *Be Here Now* as the truly vital approach to Jewish observance without which organized Jewish religion lacks immediacy.

In one update, an interviewee witnesses that his touchstones of reality are his earlier mystical experiences, and that in looking at the Torah, Talmud, Zohar, or *halakhic* codes, he seeks to bring the mystical elements to the foreground. Believing that we can learn more about Judaism from conscious and comparative relationship with other religions, he edited a scholarly collection of essays comparing Judaism and Hinduism. "I believe it is legitimate, valuable, and relevant for a Jew to take an interest in Hinduism and Asia" (p. 209).

In chapter 8—the hundred page section on "Jewish-Buddhist Encounter"—Judith Linzer attempts to integrate the intellectual with the experiential, the historical with the personal, weaving together the statements from interviewees and other sources to simulate a round-table discussion.

In this "round-table" a Christian from Sri Lanka asserts that in the way that the Bible was *originally intended*, "a life of God-centeredness was primarily meant to bring about a life of right-centeredness" (p. 230). Daniel Matt, a professor of Kabbala at Graduate Theological Union, claims that the Buddhist *sunyata* [emptiness] and the Hebrew word *ayin* [nothing] are almost indistinguishable, since both mean that nothing exists of itself (see p. 242 f.). The Jewish psychologist Ronna Kabatznick denies that Buddhist meditation is passive and socially uninvolved, for "it results in creating compassion, rather than a sense of separation. . . . . The distinction between spirituality and social action makes no sense from a Buddhist point of view" (p. 248). Judith Linzer offers a more balanced statement:

> Just as we Jews are becoming aware of needing to balance ourselves by focusing inward on personal spiritual experience . . ., the Buddhists are becoming aware of needing to learn about how to become more focussed on collective transformation and personal assertiveness in the face of external political authority, economic injustice, and physical human suffering. (p. 250)

Rev. Tanaka goes even further by explaining that "many Jews with a heritage of social activism and leftist politics, who had become Buddhists by

religion, were infusing Buddhism with a spirit of social activism that was sorely needed and very much appreciated by the progressive elements with the Asian Buddhist community" (p. 252). Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man points out that one of the main challenges to Judaism which make it difficult for the contemporary is that, in contrast to Buddhism, it is a text religion.

I want to conclude this essay with a wonderful quotation from Zen Abbott Norman Fischer, because it contains a double comparison and contrast going in two different directions:

> I think of Judaism as a religion of life. In Judaism, the dead are considered unclean and must be buried immediately. Children are named for them to get back into life as quickly as possible. There is not much sense of afterlife, rather the ongoing life of the community....I think of Buddhism as a religion for death, with its meditations on death; especially the famous cemetery contemplations of the old tradition, the central importance of impermanence, emphasis on monkhood, doctrine of emptiness and renunciation....But then again, Judaism, this great religion for life, has left a lot of people frozen, guilty, and afraid, unable to jump into life for fear of breaking God's rules; and Buddhism, this great religion for death, has become famous for fostering a broad, free, quirky, enjoyable approach to life.(p. 286)