# Jacob Sapir's Journey through Southern India in 1860: Four Chapters on Indian Life from *Even Sapir*, Translated, Annotated, and Introduced

*By Richard Marks*

For seventeen days, beginning 5 July of 1860, Rabbi Jacob Sapir HaLevi traveled from Cochin to Tuticorin, by fishing boat and ox cart, around the southern cape via Kottar and through the Tamil plains. He later wrote about this journey and his observations of the region's landscape, wildlife, economy, culture, and religion, in four chapters of the second volume of his travelogue, *Even Sapir*, published in 1874.[1]

Scholars interested in the Jewish communities of India have used Sapir's book as a historical resource to learn about Indian Jews in the 19th century.[2] But no one has examined the book for its observations of Indian life at that time, its author's view of Hinduism, his experience as a Jewish traveler in a very foreign land, or the literary qualities of his travelogue. An annotated translation of these four chapters of *Even Sapir* will open up such topics for contemporary English-language readers and allow them to encounter the lively mind of Jacob Sapir through his own words.

## The Author and His Book

Jacob Sapir (also transliterated "Saphir" and "Sappir") was born in Lithuania in 1822, immigrated with his parents in 1833 to Safed in Palestine, and after their deaths soon afterward, was raised and educated by the *Perushi* community of Jerusalem, most of whom had emigrated from Lithuania and western Belorussia.[3] Here Sapir served as a Talmud teacher and as the community's "scribe" whose duty was to compose poems in praise of famous visitors and benefactors; he continued to write occasional poems, several of which are included in *Even Sapir*. According to Yosef Yoel Rivlin, author of the first important study of Sapir (published in 1940), his two teachers in Jerusalem, Rabbi Hillel Rivlin and Rabbi Yosef Zundl Salant, educated him "in accord with the system of the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu" (1720–1797), combining holy and secular literature.[4] Sapir's education was grounded in the Talmud, Midrash, and later legal literature, but extended to Hebrew grammar and poetry, the biblical text, the letters of Maimonides, Jewish history, and travel writings,[5] and some geography and foreign languages, particularly Arabic, which he spoke fluently. He claimed even to have read the Quran and a few other Muslim books. Sapir refers several times to "books of the explorers" (*sifrei ha-tarim*) and to "explorers of the world and travelers of the lands" without naming any of them[6] and once to a book reflecting modern Enlightenment concepts, Samson Bloch's general geography of the world titled *Shevilei `Olam* (1827).[7] Indeed, *Even Sapir* reflects, in style if not theology, a number of modern elements: Its use of footnotes, the extensive narration of first-person experiences, addressing its audience as "dear reader"; its interest in Hebrew grammar and its original Hebrew poems; several attempts by Sapir to engage in "scientific" experimentation and to test miraculous tales; and its collection of folk documents and its studies of tombstones for historical evidence. The book's observations of Indian life are organized in accord with modern (European) geographic and ethnographic categories, and the extensive attention it devotes to non-Jewish lands and customs expresses a shift of values from those that shaped Jewish travel literature written before the 18th century.

In 1858 Sapir's community in Jerusalem sent him to India to raise money from the wealthy Jews residing there. After touring Egypt and observing the Jews of Yemen, he reached Bombay in November 1859 and stayed there half a year, then traveled by ship to Cochin for a two-month visit, and arrived finally in Calcutta in August 1860, where he stayed for ten months. He then proceeded to Burma, Java, and Australia before returning to

Jerusalem. Sapir portrayed himself in *Even Sapir* not as a fundraiser but an explorer discovering distant communities of fellow Jews and bringing this knowledge back home. In the book's Introduction, he wrote, "My story is only about our brothers the Jews, in places that I passed through, according to what I inquired and searched out and carefully examined, in regard to their essence, quality, and quantity." Foreign lands and people, he claimed, merited only passing attention:

> And after these matters, if the subject drew me, I recalled in a very brief manner also some of the natural features of the countries and the ways of the peoples among whom the Jews lived. Because even from this, there sometimes comes forth some benefit for historians or those who investigate ancient things.

But in fact Sapir devoted significant portions of his book to foreign lands and lives; for example, 40 percent of the book's Indian section describes India's natural features and Indian culture, including Hindu religious life.

Some sentences in the Introduction, however, belittle all of this traveler's knowledge, whether concerning Jews or non-Jews, in relation to the higher knowledge gained from studying the "Torah" (a term I use in the general sense of Jewish holy books, especially the Bible and Talmud). Sapir calls his journey "my exile" and asserts that he would rather have stayed in Jerusalem, sitting in a house of study, remaining ritually pure and "filling my belly with dainties from the Talmud and the legal scholars" instead of producing, against his will, his "chattering of words" (his travelogue). But he justifies writing his book on several grounds, some of them relevant to the four chapters under consideration. His friends, he says, urged him to write down his experiences because this knowledge was "pleasant to know" for all Jewish people and his words were "beneficial" for the holy congregation. Knowledge about foreign Jews, called "our brothers and our people," is presented as inherently valuable, but also as edifying and entertaining. In contrast, knowledge of foreign lands, as we saw above, merits only the interest of historians, and yet Sapir also wrote, "If I saw a new or strange thing, I collected it [for my book]. And sometimes I learned from this about a certain law [*halakhah*] or the literal meaning of a biblical verse [*peshat*] or an understanding [*havanah*], and I inscribed it for a remembrance." The first sentence of this quotation asserts value in the novel or exotic, based merely on curiosity, while the second sentence identifies an important theoretical purpose of Sapir's book: to attain deeper understandings of Torah by traveling outward into foreign regions beyond the study halls of Jerusalem. This project shapes even Sapir's encounter with southern India, as I shall explain.

Chapters 29 through 32 of the second volume of *Even Sapir* assume but move beyond these explicit purposes stated in the Introduction. Many pages in these chapters neither add knowledge of foreign Jews nor reveal new understandings of Torah. Perhaps they fit the Introduction's category of "pleasant to know," but Sapir's careful attention to the details of Indian life implicitly claim these objects as inherently interesting and worthy of the attention of his reading audience. Often his descriptions betray his own responses, ranging from an interested curiosity to outright admiration (for elephants, the Kerala backwaters, and the many uses of coconut trees), and to disapproving scorn (for betel leaf chewing and village women's dress), all of which Sapir finds worth remembering and recording in his book.

### Chapters 29 through 32: Modes and Frames

These four chapters contain two modes of writing: empirical description and autobiographical narrative. The first two chapters, 29 and 30, are comprised entirely of observations of Kerala, organized as units of geography and ethnology: language, climate, dress, writing materials; food, coconut trees and their uses, fruit, spices, and betel leaf chewing. Chapters 31 and 32 mix further descriptions within a larger narrative framework.

They describe the Kerala backwaters (twice), beasts of prey, elephants and their use in shipbuilding, a few basic facts about the cities through which the author passed, cattle and their veneration, the landscape of the Tamil plain, and religion (images, temples, chariot festivals); but mainly they narrate movement, either its resistance or its flow: the author wants to travel, meets resistance in Cochin and again in Alleppey, then delights in moving through the backwaters and over the Tamil plain, to depart from Tuticorin by ship with a favorable wind.

In his descriptions, Sapir frequently reminds his readers that he has personally observed, felt, or tested objects which he is reporting.

> He "heard" many languages of the East, "saw" large cases filled with leaves for writing, "saw and knows" about coconut trees. Venturing out in the burning heat, he felt thirst which was relieved by drinking coconut juice. He felt repelled after eating coconut "flesh," and he personally tasted various coconut beverages. He "saw" a caged tiger eat a dog, rode several hours on an elephant just for the experience, and "saw" men riding elephants into the sea and ordering them to pull logs ashore (although he invents the exact words spoken to the elephant and probably some details of its actions).

But Sapir also occasionally reports his own personal experiences: After pleading with the captains of Arab ships to allow him to sail with them to Calcutta, and after hearing them refuse, he lost hope and remained standing ashore with "a broken spirit"; he felt "repose and delight" while floating through the Kerala backwaters; and he feared crocodiles so much that he could not bathe in the rivers.

These observations and travels are framed in various contexts, two of which I will call "temporal" and "colonial." The narrative sections, taking place in a foreign land, are framed temporally by measurements from home and the Jewish communities of India: the months of the Jewish calendar and the Torah readings on the Sabbath (Shabbat) days of July 1860. For example, the monsoons come to Cochin in the Hebrew month of Tammuz, lasting into the month of Elul, but Sapir leaves Cochin in the middle of Tammuz. He arrives at Alleppey in the morning before the Sabbath when the section of the Pentateuch called "Balaq" is read (July 7 in that year), arrives in Trivandrum before the Sabbath of "Pinḥas," and in Tuticorin before the Sabbath of "Matot."

These chapters also speak frequently of the activities of the British, whom Sapir never encounters directly but whose military power provides the political context within which he travels. "The government of Britannia," he says, "frightens" the rulers of the land while protecting European travelers, so that he feels "no fear or fright" on his journey. The British appear in these chapters as conquerors of the Maharajas, as scholars of Malayalam, and as translators of the Bible; they establish schools to provide Indian youth with a European and Christian education, and try to convert Hindus to "the new covenant." Sapir generally approved of the British government, which elsewhere in the book he calls "happy" (*m'usheret*), "merciful," and "good." In Bombay and Calcutta, he wrote, "the merciful government of mighty England"[8] had established free commerce whereby people of all nations prosper, including Jews, through the "wisdom and freedom" implanted in these cities.[9]

## Interpretive Assumptions in the Footnotes: Ancient Indian Culture

Most of Sapir's descriptions of Indian life present themselves as objective observation, but the way Sapir words some of those observations and what he says in his footnotes offer clues to what some of these scenes meant to him.

Each of the four footnotes in our chapters draws a connection between an Indian phenomenon and something found in Jewish holy books. Thus, the long footnote about writing instruments in Chapter 29 attempts to prove that the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash were referring not to ink pens as someone in Sapir's time might think, but rather to engraving tools like the ones being used in southern India. Why this was important to Sapir is that he thought he had seen with his own eyes, in India during his travel, the writing technique used by Jews in biblical and rabbinic times and even by God, and by means of this discovery, he had been able to correct a misunderstanding of Torah in his own day. Similarly, witnessing the "large and wide leaves" of the *anias* tree (probably banana) enabled him (he thought) to gain a clearer understanding of Genesis 3:7, which speaks of Adam and Eve sewing leaves from a fig tree to make "girdings." Indian Jews had told him that the fig leaves of this biblical verse were the leaves of the *anias* tree (which they thought was a type of fig tree); furthermore, Sapir had seen Indians wearing a lower garment made of *anias* leaves sewn together in the form of the south Indian garment called a *veshti*. From these clues he concluded that the Bible was describing a lower garment of the same form and material as some he had seen in Kerala. By drawing these connections Sapir was realizing a primary benefit of travel that he had set forth in his Introduction, that of acquiring new insights "about a certain law or the literal meaning of a biblical verse or an understanding."

The logic of these connections derives from two assumptions: first, that Indian culture is ancient, and second, that it was once part of a widespread culture encompassing both Southern Asia and the Ancient Near East. For these reasons certain Indian customs, like writing on leaves and the way people dressed, could elucidate behavior in Near Eastern books as old as the Bible and Talmud. The medieval Jewish authors Abraham ibn Ezra and Moses Maimonides held a similar view of Indian culture: Maimonides considering Hinduism a remnant of the ancient Sabian community that once had "extended over the whole earth,"[10] and Ibn Ezra viewing Indian customs as a living remnant from an ancient civilization comprising all the descendants of Ham.[11]

These same assumptions underlie the two brief footnotes in Chapter 32 about Hindu practice. After describing worshipers (apparently in the Tamil plains) who raise an image of an ox's horn over their heads, Sapir adds in a footnote that this ritual clarifies an obscure sentence in rabbinic literature about Greeks decreeing that Jews must "Write on the horn of an ox that they would have no place in the World to Come."[12] Sapir thought the ritual he saw in south India explained why the Greeks chose an ox horn rather than something else when they tried to force Jews to disavow their faith. It was because oxen were sacred to the Greeks and he was witnessing the same kind of worship in India in his own day. Sapir's fourth footnote comments on a sacred chariot festival which he saw in a Tamil city. He describes people gathering together and lifting huge wheels "on their shoulders, because they are an exhausting burden even for hundreds of men, and they move it about the city on every road, with a great tumultuous voice, songs, and dances." The word "they" in this sentence refers to "wheels," about which Sapir is confused, but the "it" refers to a sacred chariot, *ratha* in Sanskrit, and Sapir's footnote associates this heavy vehicle and the "graven images" on it with a sentence in the Talmud telling how Manasseh, king of Israel, had made "an image as heavy as a thousand men, and every day it slew all of them,"[13] perhaps meaning that its enormous weight crushed its devotees.[14]

Sapir is not simply asserting that one form of idolatry is like another. A sentence earlier in *Even Sapir*, describing Hindu worship in Bombay, reveals his larger idea.

> Many of the inhabitants of the land are divided in their beliefs, doctrines, and opinions, in venerating their idols [*elilim*] and abominations [*to`evot*], of every host of the heavens, of every animal and beast of the earth, of the horn of the ox, of images and all works of delusion [*ta`tu`im*], variety upon different variety, as they were in ancient days. When I reflected on some of their worship and the days of their

> festivals, I comprehended several sayings, verses, and stories in the Bible and Talmud which I had not previously understood.[15]

The phrase "as they were in ancient times" tells us that in Sapir's mind, Indian religion, like the Indian customs of writing and dress, had not changed in thousands of years. This meant that in India he was seeing some of the same religious practices that had prevailed among ancient Babylonians and Greeks, as also among ancient Israelites who had turned to the idolatry of the surrounding nations. Hinduism was just as ancient and of the same essence, and therefore, Sapir's observations of Hinduism could help him and his readers understand obscure "sayings, verses, and stories in the Bible and Talmud" related to idolatry.

These four footnotes together make an important claim about the benefits of travel. Travel in foreign lands among foreign people not only entertained Jewish readers with "pleasant" knowledge, but did something more valuable. It fulfilled a holy task, the act of studying the Torah, accumulating holy knowledge—no longer limited to the Study House but carried out through insights acquired in the wider world.

### *Word Choice: Idolatry and Eden*

Sapir's choice of words in a seemingly objective description may sometimes convey his opinions. For an obvious example, consider his portrait of the religious imagery he saw on temple gateways (Chapter 32).

> Particularly on the roofs of the temples of their illusions [*batei ta`ato`eihem*], all of them covered with graven images [*pesilim*] and false gods [*elilim*] of all kinds of tame and wild beast, bird, loathsome animal [*sheqetz*] and creeping thing [*remesh*], and everything that is on the earth.

One can imagine Sapir using a variety of other words and animal categories for this description, but seeing a *gopuram* (temple gateway), Sapir ignores its human-like figures and applies an animal classification found in Chapter 11 of Leviticus, especially at the chapter's end, where certain animals are considered *sheqetz* (loathsome) and all animals are either *beheimah, hayah, `of*, or *remesh*, that is, tame beast, wild beast, bird, or creeping thing, just as in Sapir's sentence. The phrase I have translated as "loathsome animal and creeping thing" (*sheqatzim ur-mashim*), a phrase found many times in the Talmud, also connotes "forbidden food." Sapir's choice of words thus turns the complex imagery of *gopurams* into a Jewish cosmology that divides the world into ritually pure and impure animals and connotes repulsion for impure food. This same sentence about *gopurams* likewise reflects a verse in the Book of Ezekiel appearing in the prophet's vision of "wicked abominations" (*to-`evot*) committed by the Israelites in the temple: "And behold, every form of creeping thing [*remesh*], and abominable beast [*b'heimah sheqetz*], and all the idols [*gilulim]* of the house of Israel" (8:10). Ezekiel uses the word *to-`evot* (abominations) several times in this vision, the same term Sapir uses here and elsewhere in reference to Hindu temples. The words of Ezekiel's vision thus augment Sapir's terminology from Leviticus by identifying the Hindu images with Israelite idolatry.

Nor are Sapir's words *elilim* and *pesilim* for the statues and reliefs on a *gopuram*, accidental. Here and in Sapir's other descriptions of Hinduism,[16] he calls Hindu gods *elilim*, *gilulim*, and *to'evot*, and Hindu images *pesilim* and *ta`tu`im*—terms usually translated as false gods, idols, delusions, graven images, and abominations. These words echo with sentences from Leviticus, Deuteronomy, the Prophets, and Psalms which harshly condemn the veneration of foreign gods and statues.[17] An exegesis found in two rabbinic texts identifies these particular Hebrew terms (and more) as names of shame and reproach that Jews are commanded to use when speaking of foreign gods.[18] Thus, Sapir's choice of words, which come out of biblical and rabbinic denunciations of idolatry, carries the

worldview in which he was raised and conveys his viewpoint. Another term for idolatry found in Chapter 32, *avodah zarah* (literally: strange worship), used in *Even Sapir* five other times in describing Hindu worship, appears prominently in the Talmud and Midrash as a general term for idolatry, and one tractate of the Mishnah, entitled *Avodah Zarah*, is devoted to prohibitions against contact with idols, idolaters, and objects involved with idolatry.[19]

In contrast, Sapir's lyrical praise of his journey through the backwater region of Kerala, found in two sequences in Chapters 31 and 32, draws on a set of words from the Bible and Jewish liturgy which connote highly valued entities. His wording again echoes Ezekiel, but this time from the prophet's vision of a stream gushing forth from under the future Temple of Jerusalem, to bring fertility to the entire Land of Israel. One sentence from this jubilant vision, "And by the stream upon its bank, on this side and that, shall grow every kind of tree for food, whose leaf shall not wither, nor its fruit fail" (47:12), supplies several phrases in Sapir's description of the backwaters. Sapir joins these phrases to explicit comparisons with the "Garden of Eden" and the "Garden of the Lord." In Gen. 13:10 "Garden of the Lord" emphasizes water and fertility ("well-watered like the Garden of the Lord"), and Isa. 51:3 identifies the "Garden of the Lord" with Eden, associating it with joy, contrasted with the dry desert. These connotations perfectly fit Sapir's picture of the backwaters of Kerala. And finally, he characterizes his own feelings during this journey through words associated especially with the Shabbat. The word "delight" (*`oneg*) appears four times, most tellingly in the phrase "repose and delight" (*nahat v`oneg*). These last two words, with *nahat* usually taking the related form of *menuhah*, echo many times in the Sabbath liturgy and table hymns and emphasize the restfulness and joy afforded by the holy Sabbath day.

In Sapir's allusions to Ezekiel and the Sabbath liturgy, we see him (I suggest) seeking words to describe an extraordinary foreign landscape of fertile waters where he experienced great joy and peace. Most of his picture of the backwaters employs vivid original descriptions, but only by also comparing this landscape to biblical scenes of water and fertility, and only by also associating his feelings with the extraordinary "repose and delight" of the Jewish Sabbath, could he fully convey his experience. This literary combination of original composition with phrases from Jewish literature, often with intentional connotations, offers one of the pleasures of reading *Even Sapir*.

**The Other's Perception**

Sapir moved around India as an outsider, protected by British power. He observed and judged with a certain remoteness, never learning the local languages or listening to the Indians he described. He was impressed with Indian foods, vegetation, and animals rather than cultural values. The Indian culture that attracted him was a matter of technique, like utilizing coconut trees, riding in palanquins, and sleeping in mosquito nets, rather than ideas and attitudes. Sapir was sure of his own values and sometimes highly judgmental of other values, especially when the subject was religion. Yet we also find him, in these chapters, applying a concept that allowed him to acknowledge the perceptions and values of foreign people even when he disagreed.

To explain in Chapter 29 why village women do not feel embarrassed when they "come even to the city markets naked down to their middles," and why "no one puts them to shame" for this, Sapir quotes a saying that "the customary has become nature." And at the end of his long description of betel leaf chewing in Chapter 30, which he clearly finds repugnant (or at least humorous), he declares, with probable sarcasm, "And to them this is glory and honor!" In both cases, Sapir opens his interpretation of objectionable behavior to the viewpoint of the participants: It has become second nature or highly regarded in their society.

Even while portraying Hinduism as misguided idolatry, Sapir sometimes interprets it through this perspective of subjective validity, taking the form of a perceived holiness. In

Chapter 32, speaking of the way that people near Trivandrum treat their cattle, he writes, "they do not do work with them because they are holy to them [*qedoshim heimah lahem*]." He applies the same phrase twice again to Hindu practices, once to explain why Hindus place corpses in the Ganges River ("because this is holy to them"[20]), and once more at the end of a paragraph about people who venerate their cows: "This worship is holy to them (*qedoshah hi' lahem*)!"[21] This phrase, "holy to ..." (*qadosh l-*), is found in the Bible and Talmud; things, times, and words of Torah can be holy to God, to Aaron, to Israel. These things are inherently holy, although people do not always honor holy things as they should.[22] Sapir uses "holy" in this absolute sense when he speaks of the "holy Sabbath," "the holy City," "holy Israel," and "the holiness of the religion (*dat*) of Moses." But when he writes about Hinduism, he is speaking of people's perspectives. They consider something holy, even if it is not holy in itself.

Sapir applies this idea of perceptual holiness not only to Hindus but, elsewhere in *Even Sapir*, to Muslims for whom the town of Tanta is holy, and Egyptian Jews for whom certain Torah scrolls and saints' tombs are holy, and Calcutta Jews who consider their own Indian-influenced mourning-customs holy.[23] This concept of subjective perception enabled Sapir to loosen a little his viewpoint away from absolute judgments and gain a measure of neutral distance in interpreting Hinduism, Islam, Indian customs, and ambiguous Jewish customs.

**Remarkable Passages in Chapters 29-32**

Yosef Rivlin considered Sapir a skilled writer whose realistic and perceptive descriptions "flowed" with "the spirit of life." "There are wonderful chapters in *Even Sapir*," he wrote, "which describe life or people or even places, frequently with a brilliant picture, which only the pen of a truly skilled writer could strive for." This, together with Sapir's "subtle humor," makes reading *Even Sapir* "pleasant and captivating."[24] Rivlin identified two of his favorite chapters, one portraying the daily life of the Yemenite sage Mori Yosef ben Sa`id, and the other depicting the "court of the prince David Sassoon" in India.[25] In a similar spirit, I offer four passages from Chapters 29-32 that I find remarkable, each for different reasons.

I begin with Sapir's two descriptions in Chapters 31 and 32 of his journey through the Kerala backwaters. I earlier called them "lyrical," by which I meant their formal style and emotional expressiveness. The sentences roll rhythmically and gently, reflecting the author's journey. This rhythm is effected through short declarations, frequent commas, and a series of noun pairs such as "in summer and in winter," "gardens and orchards," and "excursion and delight" (*tiyyul v`oneg*). Certain words and meanings repeat to build up central themes: "delight" (four times in the two passages), and "all" (*kol*—also translated as "every": eight times), which is related to the words "full" and "plentiful"—together producing an impression of complete fertility and joy in time ("all year," "all day") and space ("all of it planted up to the canals which water it all"; "with every plant and every herb and every good fragrance"). Sapir's description employs four of the five senses: the landscape looks "green with vegetation," "full of branches" (from Ezekiel 19:10), and "lovely to the sight." "The joyful shouting of people and animals" can be heard. "Every good fragrance" wafts through the air, and delicious tastes abound: fruit, fresh-roasted fish, distilled liquor "strong and good," and "light fermented drink." The sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the backwaters, a place "full of delight," inspire emotions of joy and peacefulness: "the delight of our souls," "repose and delight," and "a leisurely excursion and delight." Readers are convinced of the author's feelings not only through his direct statement of them but through the sound and rhythm of his words, repeating motifs, and vividly sensed descriptions.

Another passage, Sapir's systematic enumeration of the uses Indians have discovered for every part of the coconut tree (Chapter 30), stands out for its combination of careful observation and methodical analysis of Indian phenomena, occasional anecdotes of

personal experience, and overall tone of enthusiastic admiration. Sapir analyzes Indian utilization of the coconut tree by a logical order of the parts of the tree: four uses involve the contents of the nut (milk, flesh and flour, alcoholic beverages, and oil), two the shell, one the wood, two the fiber, and finally the leaf. He repeatedly expresses his admiration through phrases such as "pleasing and beneficial," "good and sweet for eating," "a very pleasant food," "lovely to the sight," "wholesome for the stomach and heart," and "excellent" for oil and for strong ropes. Near the end of the paragraph Sapir exclaims over the way new branches sprout whenever old branches are harvested on the opposite side of the trunk, and calls this "a wonder," adding an exclamation mark.

Remarkable for quite different reasons is the long footnote about writing instruments in Chapter 29. In minimal wording, employing many abbreviations, Sapir sets out a list of nine classical Jewish sources, which each use the verbal root (k-t-b) that he wants to identify with the south Indian technique of writing. The list displays his exegetical skills and precise knowledge of authoritative Jewish texts, although assembling such a list was easy for a scholar with Sapir's rabbinic education, and such footnotes are not unusual in *Even Sapir*. This one works by making a claim about the meaning of a word in a fundamental Jewish text, the Mishnah, and then supporting this interpretation by reference to two medieval authors, a rabbinic legend, and another sentence from the Mishnah; and then, with the meaning of the term proved, applying it to clarify three verses from three different books of the Bible and yet another sentence from the Mishnah.[26]

My last example, Sapir's picture of betel-leaf chewing in southern India (Chapter 30), is remarkable for its vivid language, but even more for its reproving tone of voice. Sapir has gathered exact details of how Indians assemble the various ingredients and wrap them in betel leaves and the pouches used to carry the ingredients and flasks to receive spittle. But the author's strong reaction overcomes any semblance of objectivity, showing itself through repetition of phrases and even entire statements. Several phrases recur prominently: "red spittle," which is compared with red blood; bringing up cud, compared with cattle; and munching and chewing. This is carried out "constantly, all their days," "not resting" from this activity, and "without measure." Sapir repeats his claim about the effect of betel chewing on speech: People chew while speaking and this turns their speech into sub-human moans and half-words. In fact, about a third of this paragraph, consisting of two sentences near the end, is a superfluous rehearsal of previous sentences, as though the first iteration were insufficient to express Sapir's intention and he had to say it again in slightly different words. The brief concluding sentence, "And to them this is glory and honor!" sharply sums up his opinion of misguided social values.

## Sapir's Language and Metaphors

In his Introduction Sapir claims that he has rejected "ornate phrases and displays of speculation or words of high and hidden wisdom," having refined his writing to "the pure holy tongue (so far as God granted me), the tongue of the Bible, and with extreme brevity. Whenever possible, I put all redundant and superfluous language through a sieve." On the whole, Sapir follows these principles.

In our four chapters, his Hebrew combines traditional rabbinic language with certain elements of biblical grammar and vocabulary. Amplified with various medieval expansions and a few late innovations, this hybrid Hebrew serves as the functional basis for all Sapir's descriptions and stories. Although contributing to the gradual modernization of Hebrew in late 19th-century Palestine (according to Rivlin[27]), Sapir's Hebrew is not modern and can be confusing to those who know only contemporary Israeli Hebrew.

He usually wrote in an efficient, vigorous prose. Sentences can be long and complex, however, connected together by a manifold edifice of reasons, or can be a long series of assertions linked by the conjunction "and" (some of which the translation omits). In

addition, Sapir wove biblical phrases and talmudic sayings into many of his sentences. These phrases serve several purposes, which can overlap. They may function as essential vocabulary, such as using the phrase "precious ointment" from Judges 18:7 for the oil pressed from coconut flour in India, or placing a biblical phrase, "Arise and go" (e.g., Gen. 28:2, Num. 22:20, Joshua 7:10), in the mouth of the Indian men speaking to their elephants in Chapter 32. Or sometimes biblical phrases serve ornamental functions, such as saying that ships were "shut in and enclosed" (*sogrot umsugrot*, from Joshua 6:1) within the harbor of Cochin, or calling the vessels moving on the nearby lake "mighty craft" (*tzi 'adir*, from Isa. 33:21). On a few occasions Sapir assembles a string of biblical phrases to elevate or magnify an assertion he feels strongly about, as in the following sentence in praise of elephants: "He has mighty arms (Ps. 89:14), wisdom and understanding (Exodus 31:3) to move himself smoothly (Prov. 23:31), his bones are like bars of iron (Job 40:18), and his teeth are polished ivory (Song of Songs 5:14)." Sapir's readers recognized these phrases immediately; reflecting this, my translation indicates the phrases through footnotes rather than adding intrusive parenthetical citations to the text.

It is interesting to see how Sapir goes about "translating" his experiences in south India for his Hebrew-reading audience in Palestine and Europe. Sometimes he renders unusual sights through newly constructed phrases (although their originality is difficult to prove), as when he calls a parasol a *magen-shemesh* "sun-shield," an exact translation of "parasol."[28] To evoke his astonishment at the multitude of Indian deities in Tamil cities, he invents the phrase, *shonim um'shunim*—two words from the same root, a rhetorical pun, indicating both diversity and strangeness. Or as we saw in the case of Sapir's intense experience of the Kerala backwaters, he combines a variety of original literary effects with a novel juxtaposition of the imagery of Eden and Shabbat.

But more simply, he uses similes when he thinks his usual vocabulary and plain statements insufficiently convey the reality to his readers (and for rhetorical effect). Thus the appearance and behavior of cattle in south India are so unusual that he must compare them to two objects known at home: "a large fat back like a camel" and "swift like horses." Other such similes: Coconut shells are "hard as bone." The trunks of coconut trees resemble those of "olive trees on the Mount of Olives" and look like "marble stones." Coconut beverages resemble aqua vita, barley beer, and apple wine from Europe. The Maharaja of Travancore looks "swarthy like copper."

Finally, in a few cases, Sapir declares the Indian reality beyond comparison with anything his readers know. This applies to the fruit and vegetables of southern India: "nothing like them has been seen or found in the lands of Europe." Or the Indian reality is so extraordinary and valuable that Sapir resorts to a traditional way of asserting incomparability, calling something a "wonder," as in the way new coconut branches sprout so that fruit is available all year long.

The following translation aims for a faithfulness to the text which, although involving interpretation, as all translation must, attempts to conveys the voice, vocabulary, sentence structure, and literary style of the author—adjusted, however, when this goal has led to awkwardness or incomprehension. The annotations identify Sapir's quotations from Jewish literature, correlate Hebrew dates with the Gregorian calendar, and define technical terms; they also add historical background, compare contemporary Indian realities, and interpret some of Sapir's concepts. Sapir's writing can be enjoyed on its surface, but the footnotes show how rich and multilayered some of the text can be.[29]

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## *Even Sapir*, by Jacob Sapir Halevi
## Chapter 29
## The Customs of the Peoples of the Land According to Their Languages

The Jews speak among themselves in the language of the peoples of the land:[30] Malabari, Shingoli. This speech is harder to learn than all the other languages of the East which I have heard. Nor is it a language which speaks great things,[31] because there is no articulation of the tongue and lips in pronunciation, but they bring forth only simple sounds and syllables like the growling of animals, and they have many gestures with their fingers and arm and lips, and before the utterance is heard coming out of their mouths, they already know several hints from the twisting of the lips and the swinging of the hands. Nor does this language have any grammar. And now, since recently, British scholars of language have arisen to translate the books of the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Scripture) into their writing and their tongue, and they established for them schools and teachers to bring them to the Protestant religion (*dat*), and they do research to set up a grammar of the language for them. And our brothers from Bagdad and Yemen who settled here speak Arabic among themselves as the language of their birthplace. Most of the Jews,[32] the black ones as well as the women, understand the Holy Tongue, and some of them English too.

The heat is quite exceedingly great in this land (it is 10 degrees in latitude, 101 in longitude),[33] and the wealthy among the people go out in the summer to dwell far from the city, about one day's distance, in gardens and orchards on a river of sweet waters. Also their houses are airy and built with only lower and second floors, and for the breeze of the day, and behind their houses are gardens and orchards with shady trees in whose shade they seek shelter most of the day as a defense and shield[34] from the sun and burning heat, and wells of sweet fresh water are there for all their needs, and they go down into them to wash and to cool off during the heat of the day. At night, too, they cannot rest on their beds, for no one can hide from the heat which reigns even then, and the flies and fleas[35] go forth in battalions,[36] rising up and coming into their bedrooms and into every passage and corner.

Even the most eminent of them and among the Jews, when they sit in their houses and when they go outside to a nearby place, are naked down to their middle, and only from their hips and below do they cover their flesh with a thin wrap without trouser legs, and on their heads is a small white turban, or they go about with their shaven heads uncovered. Only when they go out to the market and to the synagogue do they dress in a long upper garment that covers the whole body. Likewise their wives—including the wives of the Jews—go about like the men with uncovered heads and thin light clothing to cover their flesh, and the village women from the people of the land[37] come even to the city markets naked down to their middles and not feel embarrassed, and there is no one who puts them to shame,[38] because the customary has become nature.[39]

All of them carry in their hands a sun-shield[40] for a defense and shelter over their bare heads from the burning of the sun which pierces down upon them,[41] and it is a thing of woven craft from tree leaves which are wide, long, and large here, and in it are also inserted some of the leaves upon which they write with a common stylus.[42]

Most of the men of this land write their letters and their account books, in their business houses and courthouses, upon the leaves of a kind of tall tree which looks like a date palm, but its leaves are longer and wider than the branches of date palms,[43] and they look white and smooth. They carve on them with an iron pen—not with ink—by means of a knife which each one keeps at his hips, using the side or back of the knife, or with an awl and stylus which are in a special case for this writing. They are faster in this way of writing than in writing on paper and with ink, and the writing on these leaves lasts for many more days than on paper; they will not decay or rot or be wiped out.(*) I saw in their shops and in a courthouse large cases filled with these [leaves], and the letter is folded three or four times and the writing is inside, and one binds a string over it and puts a seal on the string, and it is even sent in this way by post.

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(**Sapir's footnote:*[44] And [see] in Chapter Thirteen of *Kelim* about a writing instrument that is impure,[45] and see there in the explanation of Maimonides, may his memory be for a blessing, that it is an iron stylus (*heret barzel*) on one side and a knife on one side,[46] and

see in the [dictionary] `*Arukh*, the entries for *mahaq* and *dagal*.[47] And in Midrash Lamentations Chapter 2 on the verse, The Lord has swallowed, "With these writing instruments we go out and stab them." It refers to their styluses of iron that were as sharp as arrows.[48] And this is what we have learned (Mishnah Avot Chapter 5): Ten things were created, [including] ... the *ketav* and the *m-k-t-v*.[49] The "*ketav*" here is the letters, and the "*mekhateiv*"[50] is the stylus with which they write and is named so because it etches and engraves on the thing upon which they write. And the metaphor will be understood (Isaiah 10:1) "[Woe to] the engravers who engrave evil and the writing instruments (*mekhatvim*) which engrave oppression," and this is also like (Exodus 32:16) "The tablets are the work of God and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets,"[51] which, according to this, is a very apt metaphor. And this is what Job said (19:23) "... Who will grant that they be inscribed in a book with an iron stylus . . . ," and in the words of the Sages (Gittin[52]), He wrote for her on a leaf.[53]

## Chapter 30
## The Necessities of Human Life

The necessities of human life here are inexpensive, because the whole land is watered, fruitful, and verdant,[54] and the produce of the land is like the fruit of its trees: all in surfeit. Most of their food is from rice, which the land brings forth sufficient for its inhabitants, and there is enough left for other countries, and year after year they send forth rice in abundance by ship to faraway lands. There is also wheat here in plenty but they do not eat wheat bread because it is not good for their bodies' health on account of the burning heat which is exceedingly great here. Only the Jews make, on Shabbat and holidays, small loaves of *hallah* made of wheat bread to say the *Motzi'* blessing over a double portion of bread.[55] The rice, they eat boiled as it is and also they grind it with grinding stones and make from it all concoctions of the pot, of the oven, and of shallow and deep frying pans, and they also have oils and spices in plenty.

This land is greatly blessed with nuts of "coco,"[56] from which they make many human necessities, for food and drinking and other needs. And since I saw and know, I am able to count ten of them: (1) When it is young and soft, stored inside it is a sweet and fatty fluid like milk, and it is pleasing and beneficial, good for drinking to quench the thirst, and to cure all ills of the intestines and especially to make the urine flow. There are some coconuts which hold inside them about two hundred drams of this fluid. Many times when I went out on the roads and thirst would attack me from the heat of the day, I bought for a few coins one of the nuts stacked in mounds outside for sale, and with it I quenched my thirst and hunger, for their flesh, while still soft and attached to its shell, is good and sweet for eating and is filling. And every coconut that stays on the tree and grows, the flesh hardens and the water inside it decreases, and some of them thicken and become a white and fatty flesh, until there remains a tiny cavity with a little milky fluid; (2) and this white flesh attached to the shell, which is the purpose of the nut, is a very pleasant food and very filling, but because of its fat and sweetness, all who eat from it to satiety, loathe it. At first I ate half of one (which, with both the upper and bottom shells, grow to the size of a lamb's head) and I loathed it so much that I had several days of disgust for it afterwards, for I had never tried it. This flesh they grind or press in a mortar and it becomes like a thin flour white as wool and an oil like precious ointment,[57] and they mix it with a little rice flour and make from it all kinds of food, concoctions of the frying pan and the pot, and also unleavened cakes and bread, and it is lovely to the sight and good for eating; (3) from it they produce a distilled liquor[58] (*[Sapir's text]* aquavita), which is very strong and sweet, wholesome for the stomach and heart, and they likewise make other kinds of drinks from it. The fermented drink also made from it is strong and very hot; (4) and it is especially excellent for oil, and thus they produce most of the oils in this land from this nut. Many ships, to the thousands and ten-thousands,[59] bring out this oil and these nuts to make oil from them even for all the countries of Europe, as is well known; (5) the shell of the nut is

hard as bone and contains a lot of heat, and they light fires with it in ovens and meadows (because firewood from trees which do not bear fruit is very scarce here); (6) from the shell they also make many different kinds of containers; (7) the wood of the tree is hard and strong and it appears ringed and magnificent in its size and it looks like a king among the cedars of Lebanon. Its size and height are like date trees, and some among them [reach] to twenty or thirty cubits. Its trunk is like the trunk of olive trees on the Mount of Olives, its appearance and color are like marble stones, and it is as sturdy as oaks. From it they make every kind of precious object; (8) its wool [fiber] which grows around the bark of the tree is excellent for ropes, large and good, that are made for sails and masts of ships and all the tasks of boats, and are sent from here for sale to all the ends of the earth, because they are the choicest among ropes; (9) they also produce from the wool of the tree a good beverage similar to barley beer, which is white and thin, and they drink it to open the heart and quench the thirst; (10) its leaf does not wither, and they take it for writing in place of paper, and for the covering of tents and lodges, booths and huts—for most of the inhabitants of the villages, gardens, and orchards—and for the covering of boats and ships and carts, and for all the tasks of wrapping goods in the shops. All year long its [this tree's] fruit never fails.[60] For six months they gather from the tree on this side, and for six months on the other side, and thus they do again and again, continuously, because opposite the branch which is picked on one side there arises fruit from the branch on its opposite side, and on the same day that a nut is plucked from this side, a nut sprouts on the branch opposite it, and this is a wonder! And because this land in particular and the land of India in general stand upon many waters, and rivers and canals extend in every direction, these great trees flourish upon all this water, and thousands and ten-thousands of great ships are loaded with them, and they send them out to all lands.

And the other kinds of fruit from trees (except the apples which they bring from America) *(Sapir's text)* and beans and vegetables[61] are found here in plenty, and nothing like them has been seen or found in the lands of Europe. Also many varieties of spices,[62] cassia and cinnamon, clove and peppers according to their kinds, and muscat and betel nuts, are numerous in the land, but the tree which makes the *'aninas* fruit is not considered valuable here because there are very many in the land.(*) Their leaves are large and wide, like the height of a man, and they serve for utensils and many needs: to spread beneath for sitting on, and to cover their food and drink, and they also use them in the shops—in place of paper used in other countries—to wrap all small merchandise in them.[63]

The flesh of beasts and birds, chickens and geese—and especially fish—is very plentiful in the land, beyond reckoning. But they do not eat them to their fill because of the strong heat which nullifies the appetite for food, and [these foods] are also difficult for the body's health. Also, since all their foods are made with hot coconut oil, and with the many spices and saffron and the peppers of India which increase vapor and heat, the eating of light foods therefore suffices them in ordinary times, and only at known and appointed times do they prepare for themselves foods from the flesh of beasts and birds. Nevertheless, their days and years are prolonged,[64] and I have seen many old people here, more than in other lands. I saw one elderly maid-servant dwelling in the house of a Jewish man; she was one hundred and forty-five years old, and walked stooped over, her head and eyes to the earth like someone walking on all fours. She also had a son who was ninety years old.

To cool down from the burning sun and the heat of the foods which they season with the pepper of India and saffron, calamus, and cinnamon,[65] they constantly munch and chew in their mouths tobacco weed or the leaves of the "betel" tree. This is their practice: they take a leaf from these and smear it on one side with roasted lime and place inside it small pieces of the "betel" or "areca" nut which are chopped into numerous small pieces, and they wrap it together and chew it in their mouth until it turns into spittle as red as blood, and this purges from their stomachs the heat of their food. Constantly, all their days, they munch and chew these wraps, not resting from this except at mealtimes. Then from their mouths they empty a flow of juice into a flask or metal bottle which every man and woman keeps ready, whether sitting or walking (without soiling either clothes or home), and every man