Book Review

Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other God; Judaism, Hinduism and the Problem of Idolatry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2016), 265 pp.

Reviewed by Ithamar Theodor

Same God, Other God is engaged with the problem of idolatry in Hinduism, as seen from the Jewish point of view. As such, it is engaged with the question of whether Hinduism represents idolatry or *Avoda Zara*, often defined as an "estranged or foreign mode of worship." However, that which starts as a Jewish attempt to understand and define Hinduism in Jewish terms becomes a fine work of comparative theology, reflecting upon the nature of both Judaism and Hinduism, and moreover, furthers a Jewish renewal in the area of interfaith and relations to other religions.

Goshen-Gottstein considers contemporary Jewish approaches to Hinduism through which Hinduism is appreciated, to be carrying over attitudes that are thousands of years old and were formed in relation to other religions, focusing on religious difference and opposition to other gods as well as to the worship of idols. Despite being old, from his point of view the term *Avoda Zara* is not a biblical term, rather it was born during the rabbinic period; as such, it does not represent the most fundamental foundation of Jewish thought and practice (p. 27-28). Nevertheless, the term carries implicitly the notion of full fidelity to the God who redeems Israel from Egypt, ensuing avoidance of alien forms of worship. In what is essentially a polytheistic, or henotheistic, worldview, covenantal insistence on absolute loyalty makes perfect sense. The identity of the worshipped god as an "other" is primary, and the inappropriate method of worship is derivative of it. In other words, the foreignness of worship is closely related to the otherness of the other god, a notion that is coherent within the biblical worldview.

The author makes the interesting observation that the term *Avoda Zara* is unhelpful in ascertaining where the heart of the problem lies and delves into what is actually wrong with it (p. 28). As such, if one poses the question of what is actually wrong with *Avoda Zara*, one realizes that the answer is presumed more often than it is articulated. The ambiguity begins, as is already evident, in the collapsing of the strangeness of other gods and of other methods of worship into one term. To this should be added the fact that with the possible exception of a sentence or two in rabbinic literature, we do not have a discussion in that literature of what is actually wrong with *Avoda Zara*.

Apparently there is a Jewish need to separate from the nations and their gods. As such, otherness, identity, and the need to separate in faith from all that is not Jewish emerge as characteristics of the rabbinic worldview and, in a sense, also as the rationale that informs the laws and practices formulated by the rabbis in relation to *Avoda Zara* (p. 29). The concern for identity is not strictly speaking a *halachic* concern, as *halachic* discussions during the course of the evolution of rabbinic literature almost never make preservation of identity an out-and-out factor in their reasoning. Nevertheless, Goshen-Gottstein argues that this concern informs much of *halachic* decision-making and the broader Jewish concern with other religions. The battle against *Avoda Zara* is thus a fundamental feature of Jewish identity and an important safeguard for its protection. Using a metaphor appropriate for a discussion of India, he writes that it may well be the elephant in the room.

Having offered a general discussion of *Avoda Zara*, the author moves on to discuss four major medieval Jewish approaches. He first looks at the Maimonidean Model, and considers the first chapter of Maimonides' *Laws of Avoda Zara* to be likely the most influential discussion of what constitutes *Avoda Zara* (p. 47). It is concerned not only in relation to other religions, but also in relation to internal Jewish concerns, such as the appropriateness or inappropriateness of prayer to angels and the legitimacy of Kabbalistic understandings of God.

Maimonides offers what has become the default understanding of idolatry for many later Jewish thinkers.

The author then moves on to examine the first chapter of Maimonides' *Laws of Avoda Zara* (p. 47), according to which in the days of Enosh, people fell into gross error. They reasoned that since God created the stars and spheres to guide the world, set them on high and allotted them honor, and further served as ministers who ministered before Him, it was God's will that they be praised and glorified. As such, people began to erect temples to the stars, offered up sacrifices to them, and praised, glorified and prostrated themselves before them – their purpose being to attain the Creator's favor. This was the root of idolatry, according to Maimonides. It's not that the idolaters negated God's existence in favor of the stars they worshiped; their error and folly was in imagining that this vain worship represented Divine will.

Goshen-Gottstein notes that according to Maimonides' model, in the first stage there is no denial of God or confusion of the Divine identity with that of the ministering Angels (p. 48). The error touches upon relationships within a correctly perceived cosmic hierarchy and involves a mistaken understanding of God's will as it applies to celestial beings. Following the mistaken view of God's will, specific actions are undertaken, all of which involve worship in concrete physical terms – construction of temples, sacrifices, praise, and prostrations. However, Maimonides never states that the attempt to fulfill the Divine will is actually a form of service of God, and that is his view of how *Avoda Zara* is born.

Nachmanides' thoughts on *Avoda Zara* are expressed through his commentary on the Torah. His discussion on the prohibition of worshipping other gods, expressed in his commentary on the Ten Commandments, is an important resource for our discussion (p. 59). Both Maimonides and Nachmanides approach *Avoda Zara* through a hierarchical worldview grounded in the cosmic order, both pose the question of the legitimacy of worshiping beings that are lower than God within this particular cosmic-hierarchical worldview, and both operate from a conceptual matrix involving a cosmology and understanding of ensuing *Avoda Zara* that may be significantly different from the premises of a Hindu worldview. Where they differ is that Maimonides makes no distinction between Jew and non-Jew where the rules and guidelines of *Avoda Zara* are concerned; they apply equally to both. Nachmanides, by contrast, sees a major distinction between Jews and non-Jews in this regard.

From his point of view, idolatry is a relational issue and is therefore specific to those with whom God has a particular relationship. In other words, *Avoda Zara* infringes on the exclusivity of God's relationship with Israel, who is demanded to have an exclusive relationship with God and not to compromise that relationship by approaching any other being in faith or in worship as God.

If the issue is indeed relational, then the core of *Avoda Zara* would have to do with the forging of alternative relationships. Indeed, the author claims that Nachmanides reaffirms the centrality of *Avoda Zara* as something relational, establishing a relationship of believer and god with a being other than God, rather than as a form of inappropriate ritual, directed at objects of wood and stone (p. 60). Thus, contrary to what might be an instinctive identification of worship of images as the defining feature of *Avoda Zara*, Nachmanides defines the act of faith or the formation of relationship as its constitutive feature.

In introducing the eighth chapter titled "*Shituf*: Applying a Construct of Christianity to Hinduism," Goshen-Gottstein writes: "One notes with regret that rabbinic discourse limits itself on the whole to citation of the authorities of the Middle Ages and to siding with one authority or another. A fresh examination of Christianity and its theology, especially its formulations since formative rabbinic responses to Christianity were articulated, is almost never part of rabbinic discourse. A systematic reexamination of the topic, in light of a range of considerations – historical, sociological and theological – seems overdue" (p. 81). To my mind, this is one of the apparent merits of this book, and that is perhaps why I like it so much. I feel that Alon Goshen-Gottstein is indeed a daring and innovative Jewish thinker and theologian expressing a unique voice.

An alternative position to that of Maimonides was formed initially as a response to practical needs that arose out of the financial needs of Jews living in Christian countries; over time, it evolved into a principled position with regard to Christianity (p. 82). The position was articulated in Talmudic commentaries known as *Tosafot* and is associated with the 12th-century figures of Rabbenu Tam or his nephew, Rabbi Isaac. It considers the Christian God in terms of the rabbinic category of *Shituf*, association. The origins of this concept are found in a rabbinic prohibition of sharing God's name with the name of another, i.e., worshiping God along with another being. According to this position, the prohibition against *Shituf*, the worship of another being alongside God, applies only to Jews, whereas non-Jews are not prohibited from such worship. Therefore, the worship of another being, Jesus, alongside God, does not violate the norms by which non-Jews are expected to act. The upshot of this position is that restrictions that would apply had Christianity been considered *Avoda Zara* do not apply. By the 18th century, the position that non-Jews are not prohibited from worshipping God in association with other beings had become a principled acceptance of Christianity as a valid religion. What started out as a mechanism for solving a specific legal problem involving financial transactions with Christians became a principled recognition of the legitimacy of Christianity. Christianity was thus legitimate for Christians and not considered *Avoda Zara*; this position recognized the legitimacy of Christianity for non-Jews. For Jews, however, it was considered invalid, as they were prohibited from worshipping another being alongside God. Regarding the implication of *Shituf* to Jewish views of Hinduism, the author writes:

> My own sense is that *Shituf* is a useful internal category, but one that does not do justice to the theological nuances of the religions it seeks to describe. The category may therefore remain useful for future discussion as a purely internal one by means of which Jews come to terms with another religion. But if we chose to employ it in order to make gains in relation to Hinduism, as previously made in relation to Christianity, we still ought to consider how adequate it really is to a description of Hindu religious reality. We may therefore have to reconsider and reinterpret it or, at the very least, use it with awareness of the discrepancy between our own internal theological and halachic categories and what should be an adequate description of the religious reality of other religions (p. 93).

The book now focuses on the doctrine of Rabbi Menachem Hameiri (1249-1310), which the author considers to be a most promising and most helpful resource. It deals directly with the question of the status of contemporary religions rather than constructing a history of *Avoda Zara*, as did Maimonides and Nachmanides, or resolving the practical challenges posed by living in a Christian society, as did the Tosafists' *Shituf* construct. Moreover, Goshen-Gottstein considers Hameiri's teachings to be the single most important classical resource to be harnessed for a contemporary Jewish theology of religions, and considers the full import of his theology of religions has yet to be fully appreciated.

Apparently, the biblical references to other gods and the Talmudic references to *Avoda Zara* create a culture of distance and disdain in relation to other religions as well as, to a large extent, in relation to non-Jews. Christianity and Islam presented challenges unique in the history of Jewish dealings with other religions, both theologically and sociologically (p. 108). Theologically, no longer was one dealing with other gods, but with other religions that claimed to worship the same God; indeed, it is often difficult to understand on what grounds Jews could reject either religion, given that they basically believe in the same God. Carrying over the charge of *Avoda Zara* from classical literature to the dealings with Christianity and even with Islam is part of the heritage of Judaism, as it confronts new religious forms while upholding the categories and attitudes of old.

Meiri's great novelty lies in adopting a systematic and principled approach to other religions and in resolving many of the practical and moral challenges that were and still are

encountered in the attempt to apply Talmudic legislation to other religions and their members. Over and against various halachic authorities who resolved difficulties in relation to Christians and Christianity on an ad hoc basis, Meiri developed largely through appeal to the *Shituf* construct a systematic view of other religions, thereby providing us with one of the earliest attempts to formulate a broad Jewish theology of contemporary religions.

Meiri's views are summed up by two main claims. The first concerns the nature of idolatry of old and its relation to contemporary religions. According to Meiri, idolatry of old no longer exists, except in remote regions. Accordingly, all that appears in Talmudic sources concerning pagans and idol worshippers is not relevant to contemporary religions. Apparently, Meiri relies on a theory of religious progress. *Avoda Zara* is really a matter of the past as humanity and its religions have progressed from an earlier primitive (fetishist) understanding to a higher understanding of God.

The move from polytheism to monotheism, or from fetishism to the recognition of a transcendent God, can legitimately be described in terms of progress. To the theoretical recognition may be added the intuitive understanding that one's neighbors or conversation partners are not the base idolaters described in the Talmud.

The other key component in Meiri's view is the recognition that the nations of today are bound by moral codes and practice moral living. Meiri uses the moral argument to distinguish between the religions of old and contemporary religions. Today's nations are restricted by the ways of religion. They possess a moral code. The negative and immoral representations of non-Jews found in earlier sources therefore do not apply to them. The significance of the argument for morality of contemporary religions and their adherents can be variously understood. In classical Jewish terms, this may allow us to see contemporary religions as fulfilling the requirements of the seven Noachide commandments, understood as Judaism's religious vision for humanity. A more reasonable reading of Meiri is that morality establishes these religions within the very sphere of "religion," thereby affording them legitimacy.

The author makes an interesting statement according to which another religion could be aiming to approach the same God as Judaism and still be defined as *Avoda Zara.* However, consideration of the other religion as such certainly neutralizes the negative emotional and attitudinal byproducts of this definition (p.127). Moreover, the question whether Judaism and Hinduism worship the same God also allows a partial answer, considering some common aspects could be recognized and as such, sameness could also be partial. The question is raised whether Jews and Hindus worship the same God and this naturally brings to mind the biblical perspective forbidding the worship of "other gods" (p.131). In this regard, the author mentions that in a polytheistic or henotheistic context this question does not really arise, and that this discussion requires a further theological evolution; apparently one of the merits of this work is that it offers such a theological evolution or innovation.

The author highlights the unique characteristic of contemporary discussion of Hinduism, and cites Rabbi Daniel Sperber's work as an example (p. 142). Sperber's theological will to affirm the validity of Hinduism is formed on impressions created by actual encounters with Hindus. These have left the unequivocal impression that the religious life, moral character, and spiritual experience expressed in the lives of Hindus are not only valuable, but are model in ways that suggest complementarity and identity with a Jewish recognition of God. The present Jewish encounter with Hinduism is informed largely by direct contact with practitioners and their spiritual lives. The quest for spirituality and the thirst for religious experience almost favor firsthand encounter with living individuals and their spiritual lives and experiences over the more theoretical theological statements found in books and systematized in philosophical schools.

Examining Hinduism, the author identifies three groups of divinities: A. Gods that can be identified with or associated with forces or aspects of nature; B. Holy men and women, past or present, who are recognized and worshipped as gods; and C. Gods and goddesses,

who are neither. While some of these are smaller, local gods, the most important Hindu deities fall under this category. This division indeed seems to be adequate.

We will refer to the first category and for that purpose examine some relevant Bhagavad Gita verses: "7.8 I am the taste of water, O Kaunteya, and I am the light of the sun and the moon; I am the sacred syllable OM in all the *Vedas*, the sound in ether, and the humanity in man. 9 The pure fragrance of the earth am I, and the brilliance in fire; I am the life of all living beings and the austerity of the ascetics." And also, "10.31 Among rivers I am the Ganges, known as Jahnavi."

Clearly, the Bhagavad Gita offers a rich variety of notions of divinity, and that is compatible with Goshen-Gottstein's categorization of divinity as representing various forces of nature. As an example of the first category, the author mentions the great rivers, such as the Ganges, which are worshipped as expressions of the Divine. He writes that the ancient Vedic religion worshipped these various forces of nature, which were considered as gods – fire, wind, the sun, etc. – and this attitude remains part of present-day Hinduism (p. 151). Natural forces are worshipped as deities, the Hindu term being *devas*. The author notes that already in the Middle Ages, Muslim thinkers who reflected on Hinduism translated *devas*, using the term "angels" rather than "gods." The term assumes a populated universe in which created beings, who are empowered in relation to nature and to various aspects of life, dwell. These citizens of the heavenly realms are powerful and elicit worship, but they still are created beings – not to be confused with the most absolute power.

In considering these many gods from a Jewish viewpoint we are better off considering them as the equivalents of angels. How would that impact our understanding of this class of divinities from a Jewish perspective? It seems that the question under discussion is not one of cosmology or metaphysics. A Hindu view of where gods fit in the broader cosmic view could be translated to Jewish categories. The fundamental question is whether such beings may be worshipped or approached in prayer. The author now offers to revisit his earlier discussions and claims that at least two of the aforementioned approaches allow us to accommodate such worship. He recalls that Rabbi Herzog raised the possibility that Hindu worship, like Christian worship, may be legitimated as an expression of permissible *Shituf* (p. 151-152). The terminological distinction between Brahman and *devas*, a distinction that is lost by appeal to the common term God or gods, suggests clear awareness of the metaphysical distinction between these categories, paralleling the emphasis placed in Jewish sources on the distinction between creator and creation. Worship of an aspect of creation, along with the creator, is precisely what *Shituf* achieves. If one further considers the "pantheistic" perspective, wherein the created being is not worshipped on its own but rather as an expression of the absolute, the case for recognizing or legitimating such worship for the Hindu practitioner becomes even stronger. This statement by Goshen-Gottstein, i.e. considering Hinduism in the category of *Shituf,* is a central assumption in his approach to Hinduism.

The author illustrates the worship of a natural force through the River Ganges, which is considered by Hindus to be Divine (p. 153). In this case, one particular teacher that comes to mind is Swami Chidananda, whose Parmarth Niketan ashram in Rishikesh offers *Ganga Aarti*, a spectacular evening worship of the Ganges that is shown daily on Indian television. It is an elaborate affair consisting of singing, chanting, children's choirs, and the traditional waving of oil lamps and sending light floats down the river. This teacher certainly follows the Vedantic understanding, and it is hard to consider him to be a simple-minded, pagan worshipper of nature. Clearly, he offers the kind of sophisticated take on Hinduism that is often taught in the West. Precisely for this reason he has no problem worshipping the river or, more correctly stated, worshipping God as manifest through the River Ganges.

A few years ago, the late Swami Dayananda Saraswati came to Haifa University. During his dialogue with the rabbis present, he made the point that based upon the *Advaita* philosophical and religious practice, idol worship does not really contradict Judaism. Being the chair of that lecture, I responded that while they share commonalities, Judaism and Hinduism

have some distinctions – the objection to idol worship, grounded in the Ten Commandments, being one of them. While sympathetic to Swami Dayananda's point, idol worship is one of the most difficult areas in the Hindu-Jewish dialogue, and there is room to consider the *Advaitan* or dualistic point of view, too.

In entering this loaded discussion, Goshen-Gottstein quotes not only one Hindu point of view, but two (p. 174). He cites Sri Sri Ravi Shankar representing the *Advaitan* or monistic point of view, according to which the *saguna* (with qualities or form) aspect is inferior to the *nirguna* aspect (without qualities or form). This position is, in a sense, easier to deal with. But he then cites Sugunendra Theerta Swami representing the *Dvaita* dualistic school, according to which there is an essential distinction between the Supreme and matter; as such, the idol cannot be taken simply as a lower form of the Supreme. Both Hindu leaders argued along the same lines: it is not the idol itself – i.e. the wood or the stone that is the object of worship – but rather, the divinity that manifests through it that is worshipped. The author mentions the eventual ritualistic immersion of the idol in the water as exemplifying this, and in fact, the book's jacket image shows exactly this. In light of this, we may also mention the *Prana Pratishta* ceremony, by which an idol or *murti* (embodiment) is installed and awakened to life, echoing the idea of the soul entering the body. Accordingly, life can enter the *murti* through the ceremony of installation; so too, life could leave the *murti*, after which the remains may be drowned in water or otherwise disposed.

In concluding his book, Alon Goshen-Gottstein attempts to take the discussion beyond the Hindu-Jewish encounter and redefine the term *Avoda Zara* as a universal category. As such, he reflects upon the book's central question: "Is Hinduism *Avoda Zara*?" and considers whether the question has indeed been rightly articulated or whether it should be reframed. From his point of view, to ask whether Hinduism – or for that matter, any religion – is *Avoda Zara* is to ignore all the complexity of a religious tradition and all the varying nuances among its believers, whether they stem from different creeds and practices or from different levels of spiritual understanding (p.185). As such, he consequently asks: "When does the practice of a religion become *Avoda Zara*?" Or: "When should a religion be considered *Avoda Zara*?" He asserts that the new formulation assumes all religions have the potential of being or not being *Avoda Zara* and that the verdict on the matter is not pronounced on a religion-by-religion basis, but instead based on other criteria. Clearly, Hindu theology offers an interesting opportunity for attempting to construct a general theology of *Avoda Zara* in that it pushes the question a step further: If only one being exists, and all beings are manifestations and expressions of that one being, what is the meaning of worshipping another god? (p. 188). Goshen-Gottstein considers Hinduism, or its philosophical and theological spokespersons, to be offering a challenge to think through the very notion of the otherness of another god, once it is affirmed that only one God exists and that all beings manifest His being. (p. 188).

The author considers the common approach to *Avoda Zara* to be somewhat cut-and-dry, easy to define, and demanding an unequivocal response. For such a view, he says, *Avoda Zara* is not much of a challenge; once it is defined, it simply has to be avoided. And once it is avoided, it is out of sight and out of mind, no longer challenging the religious system in any meaningful way. The proposed path the author offers us as a conclusion to his book leads to a dynamic view of *Avoda Zara*: neither practices, nor faith – let alone an entire religion – can globally be defined as *Avoda Zara* (p. 203). According to this proposition, *Avoda Zara* would apply variously, according to context, need, and the spiritual understanding of the performer. This seems to have the disadvantage of confusion and lack of clear categories. But its disadvantage may also be its great advantage. Rather than relegating *Avoda Zara* to the margins of one's religious consciousness, the attempt to resist *Avoda Zara*, both within and without, may become a vital source of both spirituality and inspiration in the ongoing attempt to revitalize one's spiritual life. As such, active engagement with *Avoda Zara*, seeking to articulate its meaning, categories, presence, and boundaries, may turn it into a meaningful category that intersects with other major categories of meaning – intentionality, morality, spirituality, and more. (p. 203).

The book indirectly highlights a problem: the main interest in theologizing Hinduism and Judaism in a comparative fashion is grounded in Jewish thinkers studying and theologizing Hinduism, and not so much of Hindu thinkers studying and theologizing Judaism. It is hoped that this book will attract the study of Judaism by Hindu comparative theologians. A possible question may be: "Is Judaism a form of Brahminism?" But if such a study will indeed take place, it will, of course, be up to the author to articulate the research or comparative question.

In conclusion, Alon Goshen-Gottstein's book is a reflective and contemplative work of theology. It not only offers a valuable discussion of whether Hinduism is *Avoda Zara*, but also goes beyond this to call for a Jewish renewal in this matter.