

THE IMPACT OF HINDU-JEWISH STUDIES IN ISRAEL

or The Saliency of Spirituality

By Shalva Weil

Introduction

During the Intermediate Days of Passover (*hol hamoed Pesach*) in 2002, my son, then serving as a paratrooper in Israel's Defense Force, volunteered to man the Village of Love and Prayer at the annual Boombamela (named after the Hindu Kumba Mela) festival on Nitzanim beach, near Ashkelon. Due both to the unusually cold weather and the frightening security situation, there was only a "small" turnout of some 20,000 young people seeking spirituality. The previous year, I had carried out observations among an estimated 50,000 Israeli youngsters dressed in extraordinary distortions of Indian garb, many sitting and meditating in lotus-like positions. It transpired that many of them had returned from backpacking trips to India. The pre-army youth and the soldiers, who had not, were dreaming of making the big trip some time in the near future. As my son put it at the 2002 festival, there was more 'love' than prayer and lots of *avodah zara* (idolatry).¹

Hindu-Jewish Studies versus Popular Conceptions

Paradoxically, Hindu-Jewish studies have never been a legitimate field of study in Israel, although the popular development of Israeli conceptions of Indian spirituality appears to be unbounded in recent years. This Introduction will attempt to explain why there has been slow progress in this academic field in Israel to date, and will point out the subject's recent relative flourishing in non-academic or quasi-academic venues. Before I embark upon this ambitious task, let me delineate the borders of the area we are designating "Hindu-Jewish studies."

Nathan Katz, in a pioneering article on what he describes as the "Hindu-Jewish encounter,"² focuses on one particular aspect of Hindu-Jewish studies, namely, interreligious dialogue, a subject that Maurice Friedman also deems more important than others in the Hindu-Jewish interface.³ Katz points out that dialogue itself is rooted in a Christian model, while alternate models, such as the Hindu-Jewish one and others, may be more appropriate.⁴ The Christian model tends to focus upon the Absolute and its experience, a theological approach that may distort Hinduism as a religion. According to Katz, the "excessive concern with the metaphysical in interreligious dialogue tends to lead to 'conversion by definition,' an attitude which robs the dialogue partner of his/her right to dissent, even to speak, in fact of his/her very identity."⁵ Katz maintains that the *sine qua non* characteristics of

Hindu-Jewish dialogue are the primacy of orthopraxy over orthodoxy, and the symmetrical nature of the encounter.⁶

Other aspects of the Hindu-Jewish dialogue go beyond theology and mysticism, to the disciplines of political science, military strategy and cultural studies. In each field, the discourse is different. In the religious arena, spirituality is of the essence. In cultural and literary discussions, and diplomacy or military information exchange, the rhetoric is of a different nature. Discourses of intolerance, minority feelings and stereotypes are invoked in yet another area, ethnic and multicultural networks.

All of these fields belong to the Hindu-Jewish encounter or to the Indo-Judaic dialogue. The dialogues are played out on different stages and in different places. To date, spirituality appears to be a dominant discourse in a discussion of the impact of Hindu-Jewish studies in Israel.

Stagnation of the Field in Israel

The Hindu-Judaic dialogue and specifically Hindu-Jewish studies have been slow to develop in Israel. In recent years, this state of affairs is gradually changing as Hindu-Jewish studies is receiving legitimization abroad, and consequently beginning to make its mark on the academic cognitive map in Israel.

One possible reason for this stagnation is the resistance, stemming perhaps from unfamiliarity, on behalf of Jews to Hinduism as a religion. Katz quite rightly points out that the major obstacle — in his case to an authentic dialogue between the two religions, which is his major concern — is the Jews' traditional abhorrence of idolatry.⁷ I would add that on the Hindu side, resistance to the Jewish religion is less of an issue, but ignorance of the tenets of Judaism is a more authentic cause.

Until ten years ago, Israel did not really have much of a Hindu community. Some individual Hindus reside in Israel and there is a close-knit Jain community of diamond merchants who made Israel their home some 20 years ago. For a real dialogue to take place, Israel needed enough Hindus present to enter into a symmetrical interchange. With the absence of Hindus in the country and with the absence of access to them, that dialogue was not destined to take place.

Conversely, although Israel was known to the Indian public through films such as "Exodus" or newspaper articles, relatively few Indians actually visited Israel. However, a few, such as Ved Bhushan Singh, studied at the Afro-Asian Institute for Co-operation, Development and Labour Studies in Tel-Aviv in the '60s. He recently published a rare view of Israel by an Indian, entitled *A Hodi in Holy Land*, "Hodi" being the Hebrew appellation for Indians in Israel.⁸ Its late publication date (35 years after his first visit) mirrors public interest in Israel among Indians today, which is accompanied by an awakening interest on the part of Indians in the more academic development of Hindu-Jewish studies. How can we account for the recent changes?

Factors Contributing to the Growth of Hindu-Jewish Studies in Israel

Without a doubt, the single most important impetus to the growth of the Hindu-Jewish dialogue, and in its wake the progress in Hindu-Jewish studies, was the establishment of diplomatic relations with India in 1992. Today, with Israel becoming a multicultural country, with intense diplomatic exchanges and brisk commerce between the two countries, the Hindu-Jewish encounter is finally taking place.

In June 2002, I was honored in my capacity as the founding chairperson of the Israel-India Cultural Association, the official friendship organization between Israel and India, to be invited to the President of the State of Israel's reception marking a decade of diplomatic relations with India. Most of the major figures in the development of Indo-Israel relations were present. Shimon Peres, at the time Israel's Foreign Minister, paid tribute to Zubin Mehta, the famous impresario, who for years had encouraged unofficial musical dialogues with India. Peres also read extracts from the poetry of the Bene Israel poet Nissim Ezekiel of Mumbai.⁹

Diplomatic relations with India brought several marvelous developments in its wake: an increase in trade, a flourishing of cultural relations, frequent visits of Indian dignitaries, military and political cooperation and the "discovery" of India by thousands of Israeli post-army backpackers, many of whom were seeking spirituality. Importantly, some Israelis, including politicians and academics, met Indian Embassy personnel and transient Hindus with whom they could converse and compare notes. In 1995, the Israel Museum hosted a magnificent exhibition on all three communities of Indian Jews, and published a catalogue on their material culture.¹⁰ The Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University included documentation of Indian Jewish synagogues in their global survey.¹¹ Indian studies, particularly as taught by the illustrious Prof. David Shulman at the Hebrew University, hit an all-time high as backpackers emerged in a later reincarnation as students and philosophers of Hinduism. More Indian academics paid visits to Israel, such as the renowned professor of world civilizations, Ashis Nandy of JNU, New Delhi. Other scholars, such as Margaret Chatterjee, who compared Jewish and Hindu philosophers, stayed in Israel on sabbatical. Israeli academics, for their part, visited India for longer periods of time and more frequently than in the pre-diplomatic relations era. Several universities entered into exchange relations with Indian universities, including Bar-Ilan University, whose strategic relations experts participated.

In Israel, the study of Indian Jewry continued at a slightly accelerated, yet still controlled pace, with Indians entering the scholarly arena of Indo-Judaic studies.¹² Das edited a volume on Indian Jews in the *Eastern Anthropologist*,¹³ Abrahams published on the Indian Jews in Israel;¹⁴ and a few graduate students, including Sreekala, completed dissertations on Indian Jews in Israel.¹⁵ The journal *Pe'otim*, under the auspices of the Ben-Zvi Institute, published new research in Hebrew on Indian Jews and Indian Jewish texts, and the Institute hosted several

seminars during the last decade dedicated to a discussion of Judaizing movements in north-east India, Cochin Jews and Indian Jewry, in general. The anthropologist Barbara Johnson and a Cochin Jewish woman, the late Ruby Daniel of Kit butz Neot Mordechai, co-authored the pioneering book, *Ruby of Cochin* on Ruby's memoirs as one of the "freed slaves" (meshuhearim), her education at a convent and St. Theresa's convent in Ernakulam, her service in the navy and her eventual immigration to Israel.¹⁶ The new volume on *India's Jewish Heritage* contains five chapters written by Indian Jews, including one woman who is an Israeli Cochin Jew.¹⁷ In 2002, Indian Jews themselves took part in recording their own music: at an evening at the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem devoted to the analysis of Malayalam Jewish women's songs, run by an international research team led by Barbara Johnson and Scaria Zecharia, and at an evening with Bene Israel singers at Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, to celebrate a new CD entitled *Eliyahu Hanabee*.¹⁸

Indo-Judaic research, particularly in the field of comparative religion, was given a deep injection by the publication of Hananya Goodman's edited volume, *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, a pioneering effort, which brought together a group of scholars to investigate what Goodman calls the "resonances" between the great Judaic and Hindu traditions.¹⁹ Of the 12 contributors to the book, four were Israeli. The publication of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* was a milestone. However, of the 22 full-length articles published in the first five volumes of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, only one was authored by an Israeli.²⁰ Four articles in the field of political science related to modern Israel,²¹ three of which were penned by visiting Indian scholars to Israel and related to modern Israel.²² In 1995, I was invited to attend the Indian Studies Symposium sponsored by P.M. Narasimha Rao's conference in Kovallam, where I delivered a paper entitled "Coexistence in India; the Case of the Cochin Jews." And, in 1997, editor Sushil Mittal approached me to chair the Hindu-Jewish dialogue in the *International Journal of Hindu Studies*.

The "real" breakthrough, however, appeared less in academia and more in popular expressions of spirituality and religion. In Israel, a new type of "New Age" religion developed, incorporating elements of Hindu practice often acquired in the ashrams of India, which combines meditation with Jewish practice. Sheleg calls this medley of orthodox young people aligned with once-secular Israelis in a type of Carlebach-kabbalistic quest (as at the Boombamela festival), the "new spirituals,"²³ who are influencing hard-line orthodoxy in Israel and shaping the orthopraxy of their parents.²⁴ Carlebach synagogues and Carlebach-type prayer gatherings are springing up by the month in Jerusalem, particularly in the German Colony, Bakaa and Nahlaot quarters, in Zichron Yaacov and in other cities in Israel. The Hassidic singing, combined with meditation, individual-oriented prayer and expressions of joy, not only has an impact on religious orthodoxy, but

also has repercussions in secular circles, where people also are seeking spirituality. Youngsters attend the Boombamela at Passover and the Bereshit (Hebrew: Genesis) festival at Megiddo on the New Year, with their rock bands and Hassidic lilts. Adults attend courses at the Yakar Centre for Jewish learning in Jerusalem, listen attentively to lectures in north Tel Aviv, and participate in yoga-cum-kabbala classes in prestigious locations. New forms of quasi-Hinduism take root at the Nitzanim beach or at the exclusive, yuppie Carmel Forest Spa, where in-house Rabbi Gafni teaches meditation the Jewish way and tells of his exploits in Dhar-masala in India — all in one breath!

Conclusion

Hindu-Judaic studies are only in their infancy in Israel. A large discrepancy exists between popular study of Hinduism with its concomitant Israeli attraction to Indian philosophies, and the state of the academic enterprise. The dialogue is just beginning, encouraged by exchanges and visits between members of the two religions. While Israel has produced internationally renowned Hindu specialists, experts in the narrower Hindu-Jewish studies arena are yet to emerge, and hopefully will also come from the Indian Jewish community. There has been no Israeli follow-up to Holdrege's monumental comparison of Tora and Veda, and no attempt to compare interpretations of the two orthopractic religions of Hinduism and Judaism at the community or vernacular level.²⁵

Despite this lag in the academic study of Hinduism and Judaism, it does appear, nevertheless, that spirituality is the key to the encounter. An eye-witness account of the closing ceremony of the Boombamela festival conveys the enthusiasm in the unique Indian-Israeli, Hindu-Jewish creation:

Thousands of people stand around the central fire. From the Village of Love and Prayer, a gigantic procession arrives with drums, guitars, shofars (rams' horns) and Torah scrolls, with people singing, "Our father (Jacob) is still alive, Israel trusts in the Lord." They enter the central circle, dancing while everyone is singing, "And He who kept his promise to our ancestors." They get to the synagogue and continue singing with everyone in unison, "Shema Yisrael" (Hebrew: Hear O! Israel). That was the closing ceremony of the festival of Indian spirituality, trance and Hare Krishna. Nevertheless, all the people of Israel are holy.²⁶

The syncretism is obvious, while the sweet irony of the belief in monotheism at a "Hindu" festival in Israel complete with elements of fire, sensual motives and noises is stark. Against such a backdrop and such a sweeping popular interest in

Hinduism and Judaism, Hindu-Jewish studies in Israel will no doubt flourish further in the future. Boombamela and other cultural Hindu-Jewish manifestations will remain as "touchstones of reality," as lasting residues of salient events in the lives of persons, groups and peoples. The "dialogue of touchstones," a phrase coined by Maurice Friedman in his psychotherapeutic work with Westerners and Indians, Hindus and Jews, arises in the sharing of each side's unique touchstones.²⁷ According to Friedman, this sharing can aid people in a true intercultural dialogue, which is meaningful to both sides. It can also help in the development of a discipline.

Footnotes

1. In the light of the Boombamela and other similar festivals now held regularly in Israel, one begins to question whether Israeli Jews are less abhorrent of idolatry than their diasporic counterparts in the galut (exile).

2. Nathan Katz, "How the Hindu-Jewish Encounter Reconfigures Interreligious Dialogue," *Shofar* 19:1 (1997:31): 28-42.

3. Maurice Friedman, *Intercultural Dialogue and the Human Image*, S. C. Malik and Pat Boni, eds. (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1995).

4. Katz, "How the Hindu-Jewish," p. 31

5. Katz, "How the Hindu-Jewish," p. 32

6. Katz, "How the Hindu-Jewish," pp. 33-34.

7. Katz, "How the Hindu-Jewish," p. 36.

8. Ved Bhushan Singh, *A Hodi in Holy Land* (New Delhi: Alfa, 2002).

9. Nissim Ezekiel, *Collected Poems 1952-1988* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); R. R. Rao, "The Jewish Background of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 5 (2002):7-28.

10. Orpa Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1995).

11. A. Amar and R. Jacoby, *Ingathering of the Nations: Treasures of Jewish Art: Documenting an Endangered Legacy* (Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University, 1998).

12. Important developments can be traced from the mid-90's and the establishment of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* in 1994; the AAR (American Academy of Religion) Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Consultation, founded in 1995, and the AAR Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Group, in existence from 1998.

13. C. R. Das, "Israel's Jews from India," *The Eastern Anthropologist* 49:3 & 4 (1996): 317-348.

14. M. Abrahams, "Ethnicity and Marginality: A Study of Indian Jewish Immigrants in Israel," *South Asia Bulletin* 15:1 (1995):108-123.

15. S. Sreekala, "Israel in the Perception of Indian Jews: A Case Study of Bene Israel" (Thesis submitted to JNU University, New Delhi, 1995).
16. Ruby Daniel and Barbara Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995).
17. Shalva Weil, ed., *India's Jewish Heritage* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2002).
18. S. Manasseh, "The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay," in Y. Shaked, ed., *Eliyahoo Hanabee* (Tel Aviv: Beth Hatefutsoth, The Nahum Goldman Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, 2002), pp.11-18. Shalva Weil, "The Bene Israel of India," in Shaked, ed., *Eliyahoo Hanabee*, pp. 3-10. The song "Eliyahoo Hanabee" is sung at the Seder service on the eve of Passover commemorating the exodus from Egypt.
19. Hananya Goodman, ed., *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).
20. Meir Bar Ilan, "India and the Land of Israel: Between Jews and Indians in Ancient Times," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 4 (2001):39-78.
21. Gary Jeffrey Jacobsohn, "Hindu Nationalism and the Israeli Experience," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 1(1998): 33-56.
22. P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India and the Holocaust: Perceptions of the Indian national Congress," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 3 (2000):117-125. Kumaraswamy, "India, Israel and the Davis Cup Tie," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 5, (2002):29-39. Dinesh Kumar, "India and Israel: From Conflict to Convergence of Interests," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 3 (2000):86-116.
23. Y. Sheleg, *The New Religious People* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001)(Hebrew).
24. M. Zeller, "The Hassidic Story of the Brave Soldier and the Haredi Youth, or Experiences from the Boombamela Festival," *Glilon-Otniel Yeshiva Journal* (2002): 12-14(Hebrew). Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, who died in the 1980s, was known as "the singing Rabbi." He composed many tunes and preached Judaism through song strumming on his guitar. His songs are even more popular today than when he was alive.
24. Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.)
26. Mali 2002:13
27. Friedman, "Intercultural Dialogue and the Human Image."