

The Hindu-Jewish Encounter, New Delhi, February 2007

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When I visited R. Joshua Kolet, one of the few persons with *smikhe* (rabbinic ordination) in Thane, near Bombay, little did I expect the bombshell that he laid on me!

On his invitation, I visited him *erev shabes, parshes beshallakh* (in the Jewish tradition, the Pentateuch is divided into different *parshes* or divisions, which are read on Saturday: the weeks are, then, often referred to by the name of the *parshe* read on the Sabbath of that week). Friday night, we were talking about the *parshe* and the structure of the *nisyoynes* (troubles) that befell *Bnei Yisroel* (the Jewish nation). Joshua had his own interpretations of the *parshe* that partly complemented and partly countered mine (which I had, incidentally, taken from R. Liebttag). As we chatted, Joshua and I started talking about Hinduism and *avoyde zore* (loosely translated in English as idolatry). Joshua, who had spent a couple of years in Israel learning about pedagogy and then decided to spend a few more years getting *smikhe* (rabbinical ordination) from a Sephardic yeshiva, had not lost his independent spirit. He suggested to me, based on the text in *devorim* (Deuteronomy), that *hashem* (God) in the *khumash* (Pentateuch) was quite willing to speak in terms of gods, and it was only with the midrash and gemore that a more uncompromising attitude toward *elilim akheyrim* (foreign gods) developed.

I talked to him about my own ideas as to the essential similarity of Judaism and Hinduism. At this point, he dropped his bombshell! "I don't know if you're aware of this," he said, "but the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi is visiting India this coming week to dialogue with the Shankaracharya (the most respected Hindu leader in India)." He suggested that I might be an appropriate addition to the Jewish delegation given my knowledge of both Hinduism and Judaism. He promised to talk to the organizers in Delhi to see if they would invite me as well.

The following Monday (February 6, 2007), I called him up to discover that he'd kept his word and that I had been invited to the Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit in New Delhi, which was taking place on Monday and Tuesday of that week. I was on my sabbatical in India and teaching in Bombay, but as luck would have it, I had a class on Monday. As a result, I could only leave on Tuesday morning. Joshua and I both left for Delhi on Tuesday by different flights. He met me in Delhi, and we took a cab from the airport for the Taj Palace hotel, where the summit was to take place.

Since my plane left at 6:30 am from Bombay and, sunrise wouldn't be until 6:36 or so, I had no time to *daven shakhris* (recite the morning prayer). As a result, as soon as we arrived at the hotel, I rushed to a nearby room to *daven* (pray). Let me fast forward a little bit and tell you about the Jewish delegation so you'll understand what happened next. There was the Chief Rabbi, Yona Metzger and his wife; Oded Wiener, the Director General of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel; R. David Rosen, International Director of Inter-religious Affairs, American Jewish Committee and Former Chief Rabbi of Ireland; R. Moshe Garelik, Director of the Rabbinical Center of Europe; R. Albert Guigui, Chief Rabbi of Belgium; R. Benito Garzon, Former Chief Rabbi of Spain; and the famous Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber, Professor of Talmud and Jewish Studies at Bar Ilan. In addition, there was the Israeli Ambassador to India, Mr. David Danielli, as well as Mr. Daniel Zohar Zonshine, Consul General of Israel at Bombay. So you see that there were a lot of high-powered people.

Well, as I put on my *tallis* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries, leather box-like appendages worn during prayer), I noticed that there was an Indian man in the background watching me. I thought no more of it, figuring that he was simply curious. To cut a long story short, he came and spoke to me after I finished *davening* (praying). It turned out that he was a security officer from the Delhi Police. The Chief Rabbi had not attracted any threats (the whole visit was rather hush-hush anyway), but the Israeli ambassador had had a few threats. So this security officer was interested in this bearded man (myself), taking out some boxes from a blue bag. All this I discovered a couple of days later, when I got friendlier with him. At the moment, he was satisfied to know that it was a religious object, having in fact seen me put it on my head and arm and *shokling* (characteristic rocking movement of many Jews during prayer) back and forth for fifteen to twenty minutes!

As soon as I was finished *davening* (praying), I rushed to the room where the summit was taking place. I was already quite impressed that a Chief Rabbi of Israel would be willing to talk to a group of Hindu leaders. Back in the States, I was used to Jews with little or no knowledge of Hinduism routinely refer to Hinduism as *avoyde zore*; no matter that on discussing the issue with them, it turned out that they knew very little of what Hinduism was or even what constituted prohibited *avoyde zore* for a non-Jew. This Rabbi Metzger was clearly a very courageous person. And as I listened, my respect for him grew.

While many rabbis believe that Hinduism is *avoyde zore*, R. Metzger clearly believed in the value of talking to Hindu leaders. While my later exchanges with R. Metzger provided no definite indication as to whether he thought Hinduism was *avoyda zara* or not, I believe (and his comments during the different sessions indicate) that even if he came to India not sure about the status of Hinduism, he left with a very different idea. Even if he didn't actually end up with the belief that Hinduism was within the parameters of *sheva mitsves bnei noyekh* (the seven commandments that are incumbent upon non-Jews as well), he certainly left with feelings close to that. In fact, the next morning (February 7), he accompanied Sadhu Atmaswarupdas of the Swaminarayan Tradition to the famous Akshar Dham temple in New Delhi. He spent several hours there; while I have no personal knowledge as to whether he actually entered the temple precincts, it was remarkable that he would even visit the temple—something many rabbis I know from the United States would not have done. (R. Daniel Sperber, who was part of the group confirmed that R. Metzger did, in fact, enter the temple and, in fact, that he spent quite some time inside and was extensively photographed there; in other words, it's no secret.)

Although I had missed the first hour and half of the summit, it was clear what the structure of the gathering was. Somebody from the Hindu side would speak about a specific topic, followed by a response from one of the rabbis. In addition to the European and American rabbis already mentioned above, there was also R. Joshua Kolet, as well as R. Abraham Benjamin, who taught at the Sassoon School in Bombay (and whom, incidentally, my wife Gitl and I had met more than twenty years earlier), as well as Mr. Ezra Moses, Honorary Secretary and Trustee of the Shaar Hashshamayim synagogue in Thane. However, unfortunately, the Indian delegation was given little or no role in the proceedings. I myself did not play any part in the discussion. Having only joined the delegation at the last moment, I did not think it appropriate to push myself forward.

On the Hindu side, there were many representatives. Although the Vedas and the Upanishads, as well as many other religious texts are held by all Hindus as holy, the interpretation of the content of these texts is not all the same. Hinduism operates on several levels, which can seem to contradict each other. As a result, it is even possible to have two contradictory religious views from two persons, with both of them holding that his view is the more correct view. Now, this statement of affairs might not be a shocking one; there are many religions, such as Judaism itself and Christianity and Islam, all of which have different sects, with each sect claiming to have the "correct" view of that religion. However, in contrast to these other religions, in Hinduism, the "other" view is also considered to be a permissible view at a certain level. This is not unlike the concept of *shiv'im panim la-torah* (seventy, i.e., many different views inherent in the Torah); or the notion that even when Hillel and Shammai have contradictory views of what the *halakha* (Jewish law) is, we say "eylu ve-eylu divrei elokim khayyi"; that is, "both this and that are the words of the living God." The surprise in Hinduism is that this conciliatory world-view holds even for elements that might be considered "basic."

The reason I mention this is that the Hindu side had representatives from many different *sampradayas* or traditions. Although the Shankaracharya had, in fact, not come to the Summit due to ill-health, there were *acharyas* (heads of ashrams) from many other traditions. Many of them were from the tradition of Shankara (6th century, C.E.), but some were from other traditions, such as Madhva and Swaminarayan. The tradition of Shankara is called *advaita* or nondualism. This refers to the essential identity of the Self (Atman) and the Whole (Brahman). *Advaita* teaches that the world is seen as multiple because of *avidya* (ignorance). However, in reality, everything is a manifestation of the attributeless and formless Brahman. In fact, the Chandogya Upanishad says "Tat tvam asi," which can be translated as "Thou art That," i.e., asserting the identity of the Thou (the Self) and the That (Brahman). (The Upanishads are canonical texts that, along with the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita are acknowledged by all Hindus as representing the revealed Truth.)

Now, this is definitely problematic for Judaism, which in its Orthodox form insists on the distinction between the Created and the Creator. It was therefore surprising to me to hear Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the foremost Hindu leader at the summit (in the absence of the Shankaracharya) present an alternative interpretation of the *mahavakya* (or great utterance) "Tat tvam asi"—usually translated as "Thou are That," equating the human being with the Supreme Consciousness, known as Brahman. According to the alternative interpretation that Sri Dayananda Saraswati placed on this *mahavakya* or "great utterance," this does not mean the identity of Man with Brahman. In fact, he said that the fact that the two were placed in some kind of equivalence itself indicated that the two were not identical; else the statement would be nonsensical. What it means is that both of them share at a fundamental level that unboundedness of essence. "Tat tvam asi" is true, only at a transcendental level, but not at an individual level. This was one of the interesting exchanges that I caught that might have missed the periscopes of the other people in the hall.

Both on the Jewish and the Hindu side, many comments were made as to the essential similarity between the two religions. For example, a comparison was made between Makara Sankranti, a Hindu Winter Solstice festival, which occurs at about the same time as Tu biShvat. Swami Dayananda Saraswati spoke about the importance that both traditions placed on improving the world. He noted the

concept of "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinam," or the need to seek "the welfare of all things," in Hinduism, which is paralleled by the importance given to improving the world in Judaism.

R. Sperber, who had for a brief period, functioned as the Chief Rabbi in Calcutta several decades ago and, as a vegetarian, still had a deep connection to India, spoke about the similarities between Hinduism and Judaism. He recalled a "midrash" about the Hindu sage, Vyasa, who had acquired a lot of spiritual energy through meditation and penance. However, when he used his strength to try and create a new world that would be better, his strength failed him utterly. R. Sperber used this story to point out the need for Man to realize his limitations. There is a similar story in the gemara that tells about the attempt to eradicate various human shortcomings, such as the *yetser ha-ra* (the evil inclination in Man), only to realize that that too has its place.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati also spoke about the parable of the wave and the ocean—even though the wave seems to have an identity separate from that of the ocean, it is nothing but the Ocean, itself. The notion of God being transcendental and immanent, which Swami Dayananda mooted was echoed by the Chief Rabbi, who noted that in the Jewish tradition, God is known as both *mesovev kol almin* (encompasses all worlds) and *memalei kolmakom* (pervades all space), which refers to essentially the same idea.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati noted that whereas religions such as Islam and Christianity sought converts, thus failing to respect the integrity of other religions, Judaism and Hinduism realized that different religions might advocate different paths to God, but all of them reached the same destination. With all these sentiments trumpeting the essential similarity between Hinduism and Judaism, R. Rosen felt obliged to clarify the limits to religious relativism; that Judaism did not recognize the equality of all religions.

However, all this was said in such a masterful manner that nobody would have taken umbrage at what was, essentially, an assertion of the superiority of Judaism. In fact, most of the time, R. Rosen also functioned as the translator for the Chief Rabbi, whenever he spoke in Hebrew; he kept up a continuing translation of the proceedings into Hebrew for R. Metzger as well. R. Rosen's translations were more than translations; they were truly beautifully crafted interpretations.

It was truly amazing to see how respectful both traditions were of each other. In deference to the vegetarianism of the Hindu group, the Jewish group ate only vegetarian food. However, while the vegetarian food for the Hindu group was prepared on the premises of the hotel, the Jewish food was prepared in *koshere keylim* (kosher utensils) by the Chabad rabbi in Bombay and flown to Delhi; the plates and cutlery were bought new in Delhi for the occasion.

At the end of the day, leaders of both groups signed a declaration of mutual understanding and cooperation. I will end by citing two of the points from this declaration that I feel are most enlightening in terms of the mutual recognition of both groups.

- Their respective traditions teach Faith in One Supreme Being who is the Ultimate Reality, who has created this world in its blessed diversity and who has communicated Divine ways of action for humanity of different peoples in different times and places.
- Because both traditions affirm the central importance of social responsibility for their societies and for the collective good of humanity, the participants pledged