

Sri Aurobindo Ghose was born in Calcutta in 1872⁶⁵ and was educated in England from age seven through college. Like Bergman, he came to an understanding of his own culture—the languages, literature, religions and history of India—as a young adult. Like Bergman, he was deeply interested in politics. He became active in the anti-British movement in the first decade of this century. Imprisoned on bombing charges in 1908, he spent the year in prison studying yoga and, after his acquittal, withdrew from all political involvement to found a contemplative community in Pondicherry. Aurobindo developed a system which he called Integral Yoga, combining the old *yoga*'s, or Hindu disciplines, with a view to seeking an integral or total change of consciousness both for the individual and for all of humanity. Bergman was drawn to Aurobindo's ideas because he believed that they would lead to a transformation of all life and thus had both a mystical expression and a practical application.

The first reference to Aurobindo in Bergman's journals is made in the context of his participation in a symposium on the thought of Elieser Yellin at the end of 1946. Bergman's lecture, "Miracle in the TANAKH as a Philosophical and Pedagogical Problem," focused on science and belief. Having begun with the problem of a Jewish position as a problem of synthesis, he "...allowed something of the power of the spirit in that which I had read about Aurobindo recently, to weave in [...]"⁶⁶ While it appears that at this time Bergman had read *about* Aurobindo rather than the work of Aurobindo himself, this is a good example of how he turned to Hindu thought to express something about Judaism. Unfortunately the reference is too cryptic to allow for fuller conclusions.

Bergman made a habit of summing up his intellectual pursuits, listing his current reading at the beginning of each year. Thus it is that we have confirmation that he had begun to seriously engage in the thought of Aurobindo in the winter of 1946/47:

New views on a fundamental metaphysical orientation through the writings of Aurobindo, which I have just begun to read. I know yet too little of it in order to be able to say whether it will give me lasting claim or whether I will lay it aside after some time, nevertheless in the little that I have read in the *Involution and Revolution*, hope of a new humanity lies above all in a solidification of metaphysical ideas so that they do not remain in the free air and in emptiness, but bind themselves with reality.⁶⁷

Because Bergman was in constant quest for a religious expression which would find absolute application in life and because he demanded that Jewish political life be consonant with Jewish religious ideal, he was drawn to

Aurobindo, believing that Aurobindo's thought supported his own synthesis. A 1957 entry exemplifies this synthesis of faith and deed:

The objective and subjective sides of the divine presence contain in them human greatness and human tragedy: God is always there, the question is only whether I am there for God. Whether I manifest this openly. Here is the whole eternal possibility of a human; one's need to understand a dialogue with God, all the more not to understand but to do. This is it, what Aurobindo always evermore emphasized, to dedicate deeds to God.⁶⁸

In Sweden, Bergman held a series of lectures on contemporary religious thinkers. Reflecting on this work in his journal entry, Bergman compared Rav Kook, Aurobindo and Max Brod:

...Rav Kook...His thoughts are very bold, but always in the most severe way, limited and burdened with Jewish exclusivity. I have drawn the most profit from study of Aurobindo. I have now read through both volumes of Brod's book [*Diesseits und Jenseits*] for the most part and am writing for *Davar* on it, but measured against Kook or Aurobindo, what he can give remains very backwards. He settles always with Materialism and Positivism, but this is too low of a springboard in order to come very high. In contrast Aurobindo opens a whole world.⁶⁹

Bergman rejected exclusivity even as he confirmed the particular covenant between Jews and God.

From the moment he arrived in India in 1947, Bergman seemed prepared to see Judaism in light of Indian thought. During a Shabbat visit to a Bombay synagogue of the Bene Israel, someone asked him a question "concerning the religious mission of Israel as a mission of holiness of life," an expression which he described parenthetically as springing from Indian language usage.⁷⁰ Curiously, Bergman understood this question as an Indian expression when it seems, rather, to be drawn directly out of the Torah, and specifically out of Exodus 19 and Leviticus 17. Of all the ties between Jews and the Far East—political, social, and economic, to name a few which could be developed—Bergman underscored Judaism's religious contact with Indian culture.⁷¹

For Bergman, a clear point of connection between Judaism and Hinduism lay in mystical expression wedded to practical deed. He always searched for resolution and thus it is that the late evening visit of a mysterious white-clad man to his room in Delhi provoked deep thought. The man, who remains

anonymous, invited Bergman to an international religious service to which he said he had also invited the King of England, President Harry Truman and Joseph Stalin. Although Bergman speculated that the man might be crazy(!), he saw clarity in his discussion of religious ideas. The man expressed himself to Bergman in the following way:

The religious goal of a human is to make oneself free from the wheel of rebirth. A human brings about his own *karma* in the next life. When one saves oneself, one returns to God. God does not affect the fate of humans, this a human being does alone.

His talk excited me so much, above all his strong insistence that the human and only the human forges one's own fate and so no influence of God is to be expected. A view which is heroic but, however, makes God fully unnecessary to the world.⁷²

Another strange encounter left Bergman with a contrasting message. He visited a Jain community where he experienced, in spite of the friendliness, "a fearfully depressing feeling of complete estrangement".⁷³ He was taken to a house where Jain nuns dwelt and was struck by their contentment. Just as he was about to leave, one nun asked the guide to tell Bergman's group the following: "If you have come into life, then you should use it for the service of God. If not, it is as if you had a diamond in hand and threw it away."⁷⁴ Quite possibly, this proverb stuck in Bergman's mind because of its affinity to Jewish folktales. At any rate, the passage once again demonstrates Bergman's willingness to find universal wisdom in disparate encounters.

The ideas of Aurobindo appealed to Bergman because of the latitude they afforded the rational person of faith. They offered him guidance but not rigidity and encouraged him to continue on his religious journey, using Jewish teachings as his guide, yet not being hemmed in by them. No text has absolute power, an idea he conveys in a 1967 reaction to reading Aurobindo's *Synthesis of Yoga*:

...no written scripture can be more than a partial expression of eternal knowledge. My thought of the arsenal of *mitzvot*. 'Finally must the yogi take his own point of view. He is not the student of a book. He is the student of the eternal.' Vivakananda: 'the unity of all reactions must express itself through a growing variety in its forms.' (Just as each Jew has his own *Shulchan Arukh*!) 'The final law and the last ceiling is freedom.'⁷⁵

Bergman's announcement that "each Jew has his own *Shulchan Arukh*," an idea many would clearly find unacceptable, particularly indicates his personal

interpretation of Judaism. Yet this assertion also demonstrates Bergman's flexibility, a lack of rigidity which carried him into the exploration of Asian traditions. According to the passage above, for Bergman, as for Aurobindo, searching is part of the process of spiritual growth. When asked whether the inner voice is clear, according to the Indian thinkers, Bergman's answer is drawn from Aurobindo's *Synthesis of Yoga*:

Aurobindo names God in this connection "the Mother" and says, apparently to a question of a student: "You converse with the Mother who is always with you and in you. It is only important that you listen carefully, so that no other voice can ape her voice or can wedge itself between you and her." In another place one reads: "This opposition against divine power is for an eternity experienced not as a temptation or belief(?), but as a compulsion, to seek greater power, a complete self-knowledge, a thoroughly compelling purity and power of inspiration, a belief which nothing can shake, a mighty ascension of divine grace." "The Mother will not try you, but will help you in that moment in which you overcome the necessity of tests and difficulties which belong to another consciousness."

Of significance is also the following quote: "To say that every light is good, would be the same as saying that all water is good; this would not be true. One must examine what is the nature of the light or from whence it comes, and what it has in it, before one can say that it is the true light. There are false lights and misleading lights. One must be wary and decide; the true distinction must come through the washing of the psychological feelings and through purified spirit and experience."

I believe, to be able to answer your questions in this sense, that Aurobindo means that there is no "how" which one could understand as an objective criterion or an etiquette, whether God speaks or is it a mirror image of one's own essence. One will need, as Aurobindo says, many years of practice of listening carefully and probably also many failures. Aurobindo says ever again, one should let oneself be exhausted by stumbling and tripping.⁷⁶

Bergman noted the death of Aurobindo in 1950 with an expression of gratefulness: "Today the news of Aurobindo's death came. With deep gratitude I think of his blessing on me."⁷⁷ He remarked upon a 1951 celebration of Aurobindo at Hebrew University, that Aurobindo was the one to whom he owed the most in recent years.⁷⁸

Strong evidence of the lasting influence which Aurobindo had on Hugo Bergman is found in the final entry in his published letters. On February 6, 1975, just four months before his death, Bergman wrote enthusiastically to his son Martin:

[...]I write this letter to New York, without knowing whether you are there or on the way to India. I recommend to you urgently a visit to Pondicherry, to the Ashram of Sri Aurobindo.⁷⁹

Bergman's contact with India and Hindu philosophy shook the foundations of Western philosophy for him. He described himself as somehow falling between two stools in his quest to widen the borders of human knowledge.⁸⁰ Perhaps his greatest contribution resulted from his ability to see similarities in Asian and Western thought. For instance, he developed an opinion about death in accordance with the writings of Rav Kook, Leonard Ragaz and Aurobindo, describing it not as an endpoint but as a point of transition, as a new beginning.⁸¹

Was Bergman uncritical in his absorption of Aurobindo's ideas? Perhaps, he was so deeply impressed by Aurobindo's integration of the spiritual with the deed and found the affinities to his own thought so great that he could not gain critical distance on Aurobindo. Even so, Bergman could not bridge one fundamental difference: Aurobindo's identification of humans with God. This was a step which Bergman, like Buber, did not make.⁸² He drew the line at the mystical connection between human deeds and devotion to God and this primarily was, for him, the intersection between God and humans as well as the meeting ground of Judaism and Hinduism.

The stark differences among Baeck, Buber and Bergman are partly a function of their orientations. Baeck had the clear goal of defending Judaism and quite sharply distinguishing it from all other religious expressions. Buber, on the other hand, lost nothing in acknowledging the strengths of Buddhism and Hinduism, for he could draw on them in his philosophy of dialogue and dismiss them when they were not useful to him. Bergman, above all, sought some kind of meaningful exchange between Judaism and Hinduism. Yet his embracing of Hindu thought was significantly limited, for he focused primarily on one modern, relatively westernized voice, Sri Aurobindo. In some ways, Buber went further in his exploration of Eastern traditions; for example, in addition to his study of Chinese texts, he read the Upanishads and incorporated some of the teachings of classical Hinduism into *I and Thou*. Ultimately, none of these men was able to fully appreciate the subtleties of the Asian traditions which they explored. At worst, Baeck dismissed all but a Jewish religious expression and, at best, Bergman was too narrowly focused on the modern mystic-philosopher Sri Aurobindo Ghose.

Scholars today can only speculate as to why Baeck, Buber and Bergman were moved to dabble in Asian traditions. Even though each of the three came to his studies of Hinduism and Buddhism for different reasons and each drew distinct conclusions, they are unified in seeking to establish a place for Judaism in the context of world religions. Each seems to have sought to transcend the pattern typical of their times, one in which Judaism was viewed simply as the cradle of Christianity. Although we must conclude that each writer had limitations in approaching the traditions of Asia, their contributions were ground-breaking in that they offered a new approach to addressing Judaism in the modern world. A second conclusion, which is alluded to at the outset of this study, may be even more instructive: part of the explanation certainly lies in the times and the reasons delineated by Mendes-Flohr in the essay discussed above. For distinct purposes, these men (possibly with the exception of Leo Baeck) were drawn to trace Jewish origins to Asia and to re-establish ties with non-European culture. This move toward Asia is manifest to some extent in Buber's work on Hasidism and in Bergman's identification with Zionism. It bore real fruit in their studies of Hindu and Buddhist texts.⁸³

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NOTES

- ¹ Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions, Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), pp. 77-132.
- ² Mendes-Flohr, p. 82.
- ³ Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World, a Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 322a. An illustration of this is to be found in Bruno Bauer's *Die Judenfrage*, published in 1843. Bauer argues that the Jews have been unable to develop with history due to their "oriental nature".
- ⁴ Mendes-Flohr, p. 83. In the 19th century Jews began to build their synagogues in a style much influenced by Muslim architectural motifs as a way of separating themselves from European church architecture, while at the same time making a statement about Jewish origins in the middle east. See Hannelore Künzl, *Islamische Stilelemente im Synagogengestaltung des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1984).
- ⁵ Mendes-Flohr, pp. 83ff.
- ⁶ Mendes-Flohr, p. 81. The original is found in "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," in *On Judaism*, Nahum Glatzer, ed., (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 75.
- ⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 171. "When I drafted the first sketch of this book (more than 40 years ago), I felt impelled by an inner necessity."
- ⁸ *Das Wesen des Judentums*; the English translation was published in 1936.
- ⁹ Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 59.
- ¹⁰ Baeck, p. 60.
- ¹¹ Baeck, pp. 60-61.
- ¹² Baeck, p. 45ff.
- ¹³ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 27.
- ¹⁴ Baeck, p. 84.
- ¹⁵ Baeck, p. 84.
- ¹⁶ Baeck, p. 172.
- ¹⁷ Baeck, p. 222.
- ¹⁸ Baeck, p. 223.
- ¹⁹ Baeck, p. 251.
- ²⁰ Baeck, p. 206; The Bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana Buddhism is based on the teaching that those who have attained enlightenment will remain in the world, engaged in a life of compassion aimed at alleviating the suffering of others. Harvey, pp. 122-24.

- 21 Daniel L. Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 25ff. Overmyer describes a variety of Chinese "messianic" movements in which claims concerning the advent of *Maitreya* were made. Incidentally, Buber makes an oblique reference to *Maitreya* in his *I and Thou*: "And they expect as the coming Buddha, the last one of his eon, him that shall fulfill love." p. 141.
- 22 Fritz Rothschild, ed., *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity: Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Will Herberg and Abraham Heschel*, (New York: Crossroad, 1990). See the introduction to the section on Leo Baeck by Lou Martyn. I am grateful to Robert Schine of Middlebury College for pointing me toward this source.
- 23 Jonathan R. Herman, *I and Tao, Martin Buber's Encounter with Chuang-Tzu* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).
- 24 Herman, p. 1.
- 25 Herman, pp. 127-8.
- 26 Buber, pp. 57-8.
- 27 Buber, p. 58.
- 28 Herman, p. 164.
- 29 Martin Buber, "The Spirit of Orient and Judaism," in *On Judaism*, Nahum Glatzer, ed., (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 57.
- 30 Buber, p. 58. Mendes-Flohr explores this dichotomy in his "Fin de Siècle Orientalism," pp. 86-87.
- 31 Buber, p. 65.
- 32 Buber, p. 68. It is noteworthy that Buber's language echoes the Hindu view that life, and indeed the universe, is cyclical.
- 33 Buber, p. 77.
- 34 Martin Buber, "A Conversation with Tagore," *A Believing Humanism, Gleanings*, Ruth Nanda Anshen, ed., (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), pp. 183-85. Buber later recalled a conversation he had with the Bengali sage Rabindranath Tagore regarding the right of Jews to settle in Palestine. Nahum Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Letters of Martin Buber, A Life of Dialogue*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1991). Richard and Clara Winston, and Harry Zohn, trans., pp. 476ff. Dialogue with Mohandas Gandhi on this subject during the Holocaust was brief and inconclusive.
- 35 Buber, "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," p. 78.
- 36 Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 126.
- 37 Buber, p. 136.
- 38 Buber, p. 133. (Bracketed Sanskrit words are my addition.)
- 39 Buber, p. 125.
- 40 Buber, p. 127.
- 41 Buber, pp. 110-111.
- 42 Buber, p. 136.

- 43 Buber, pp. 138-143.
- 44 Buber, p. 138.
- 45 Buber, p. 139.
- 46 Buber, p. 140.
- 47 Buber, p. 141.
- 48 Buber, p. 143.
- 49 Buber, p. 168. (Bracketed translation is my own suggestion.)
- 50 These lectures were given under the auspices of the Bar Kochbah Association and at the invitation of Hugo Bergman.
- 51 *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 4.16.71, p. 3; Leo Baeck Institute Archives (B9, F1). Bergman arranged the early relationship between Bar Kochbah and Buber. The lectures given to the Association have been published as the first three addresses in *On Judaism*.
- 52 *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 12.6.63, p. 3; Leo Baeck Institute Archives (B7, F1).
- 53 *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, p. 3.
- 54 Jewish Affairs (December, 1968), "Grand Old Man of Jewish Philosophers: HB at 85," Leo Baeck Institute Archives (B9, F3).
- 55 *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 4.16.71, p. 3; Leo Baeck Institute Archives (B9, F1).
- 56 *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, Vol. 6, *Studies in Philosophy*, S. H. Bergman, ed., (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, HU, 1960).
- 57 *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, p. 116.
- 58 Yirmiyahu Yovel, "Reason as the Necessary and Insufficient—Bergman Between Philosophy and Faith," *On Schmuel Hugo Bergman's Philosophy*, A. Zvie Bar-On, ed., (Amsterdam: Rodophie, 1986), p. 78.
- 59 Hebrew: "National Committee." This group functioned as the provisional Jewish government in Palestine from 1920-1948.
- 60 Hugo Bergman, *Tagebücher und Briefe, Bnd. I* (Königstein/Ts: Athenäum Verlag GMBH, 1985), p. 749. All translations from this collection are my own.
- 61 Bergman, p. 227.
- 62 Bergman, p. 157. In 1947, when he was called to Sweden as a religious leader, he lamented: "I feel so insecure and weak in all things vis-à-vis God; and now should I be a leader in Stockholm, when I myself so much need a leader?"
- 63 Bergman, p. 166.
- 64 Bergman, p. 173.
- 65 Pether Heehs, *Sri Aurobindo, A Brief Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). This biographical data is drawn from this source.
- 66 Bergman, p. 707.
- 67 Bergman, p. 710.
- 68 Bergman, *Bnd. II*, p. 244.

- 69 Bergman, *Bnd. I*, p. 739.
- 70 Bergman, p. 718.
- 71 Bergman, pp. 732-3.
- 72 Bergman, p. 719.
- 73 Bergman, p. 725.
- 74 Bergman, p. 725.
- 75 Bergman, *Bnd. II*, p. 536.
- 76 Bergman, *Bnd. I*, p. 738.
- 77 Bergman, *Bnd. II*, p. 72.
- 78 Bergman, p. 77.
- 79 Bergman, p. 708.
- 80 Bergman, p. 247.
- 81 Bergman, p. 92.
- 82 Bergman, p. 242.
- 83 Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), particularly Ch. 5, "The Invention of the Authentic Jew." Robert Schine has kindly pointed out that a name has been given to this phenomenon: "exoticism".