FEATURE REVIEW ARTICLE

Hananya Goodman (ed.), *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 344 pages, 24 cm, ISBN 0-7914-1715-8 (hardcover).

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The world as a global village calls for understanding among religions. The study of different religions should be useful in establishing peace and harmony in the world. The present volume makes a significant contribution in this direction. It gives serious attention to the religious traditions of India and Israel, the two main sources of world-culture and spirituality. The title of the book is remarkably appropriate. Jerusalem and Benares truly represent the spirit of the two traditions. The importance of these two cities was revealed to David Schulman (preface) by the old men in Varanasi who rightly said: these two sisters are truly alike and share a continuous passion for the holy. Pope Urban II declared, while launching one crusade, that Jerusalem is the center of the earth. Similarly, Indian classics depict Benares as the center of the universe, where the footprints of the creator are still preserved and worshipped by devout Hindus.

Although the essays can be read independently, a continuous theme runs through the volume, which is divided in two parts dealing with historical encounter and cultural resonances. There is a valuable and exhaustive introduction by the editor. The essays provide a fertile ground for further study. As David Schulman suggests in the preface, more than making comparisons they help a certain kind of listening, letting us hear the echoes that connect two ancient civilizations.

The contact between India and Israel is very old. Western discussions centering on religion, culture, language etc., have generally involved reference to Judaism and Hinduism. Wendy Doniger's somewhat personal essay "The Love and Hate of Hinduism in the Work of Jewish Scholars" provides a panoramic view of the Jewish attitude towards Hinduism. The Jewish interest in other cultures is remarkable. Since Jewish history is characterized by 'exile' and 'survival on the periphery' of other civilizations, it became necessary for the Jews to assimilate and be assimilated by 'others.' This gave rise to the 'culture of questions' among the Jews who were ever inclined to raise questions. According to Hananya Goodman, this makes the Jews 'Meta-rabbis', always breaking new ground. It also enables them to become 'frequent travelers between Jerusalem and Benares.' A similar culture of questions dominates Indian thought. Hinduism has encouraged the spirit of free and open inquiry since Vedic times. Attainment of knowledge was regarded as the

greatest virtue. This led the Indians to make equally significant contributions in different fields of learning.

Both Judaism and Hinduism discouraged dogmatism and orthodoxy, and provided greater scope for free thinking and critical inquiry. While giving the individual unlimited freedom in thinking, both demand strict adherence to duty. The editor rightly suggests that this characteristic provides a sound basis for an encounter between them. Being alike in many ways, they simultaneously attract and repel each other. If there are many Jews who admire Hinduism, there are others who strongly criticize and condemn it. Wendy Doniger believes that Jews like her have taken Hinduism as a source of personal meaning because they find in it the repressed side of their own religion. She has found, like the hidden treasure of the Rabbi in the Hasidic tale, her native treasure abroad in India. In this context, it is not remarkable how the scientist J. R. Oppenheimer recalled the verses of the Gita when witnessing the explosion of the atom bomb.

Shalva Weil's essay, "Yom Kippur: The festival of closing the doors," gives an insight into the Jewish capacity for adaptation in India's alien hierarchical caste system and brings out the nature of complementarity in Indian society. The relationship between the Hindu social structure and the worship enacted by the Bene Israel Jews settled in the Marathi-speaking areas of India is quite interesting. Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg have also done pioneering work in this field and have explored the significant role played by various Jewish groups settled in India.

Bene Israel, incorporated in the caste-system as Sanvar Telis, or "Saturday oil-men," reinforced the complex mentality inherent in Indian society. On the day of Yom Kippur, they closed their doors, completely abstained from work and maintained silence. Their Hindu neighbors took care of their work. After milking their cows, the Hindus would leave the milk and silently go away, respecting the Jewish customs and observances, a remarkable gesture of accommodating a minority way of life. Instead of forcing Bene Israel to change its ways and adopt the ways of the majority, the Hindus admired the Jews and encouraged them to follow their own religion. The Bene Israel, on their part, would try to imitate the upper caste by abstaining from food, wearing white clothes and observing chastity. Thus they would legitimize the caste system and perpetuate the status of absolute purity of the Brahmins. The caste-system, in spite of its weaknesses, has helped India's minorities maintain their identity and resist assimilation.

Francis Schmidt highlights Jewish admiration of the 'ideal Brahmin' in the essay "Between Jews and Greeks: The Indian Model." Early Jews formed romantic notions about India based upon the narratives of the Greek historians. These related to the first contact between Greece and India, especially the interview between Alexander and the Brahmins. Most of the Brahmins rejected the threats and inducements of Alexander. But one Brahmin, Calanus, agreed to accompany Alexander to Greece. Finally he, too, chose a voluntary death by

burning himself on a pyre before the very eyes of the king. These Brahmins subsequently became models of the highest virtue and came to represent that spirit which could not be subdued or enslaved by brute force. The Sikh Gurus in medieval India also became the models of such heroism through self-sacrifice.

The Brahmins who maintained their freedom in the face of oppression, and preferred death to slavery, represented the true spirit of the Gita. These heroic people were superior even to fire which could not really consume them. Philo sets Calanus as a paradigm of the Indian rejection of Hellinism. When the Jews began following the Brahmanic ideal, some Greek philosophers described them as the true descendants of the Brahmins. The Essenes among the Syrians conducted themselves as free in the face of cruelty, deceit and threats by the enemy and became the heirs and torch bearers of Brahmanism. It is remarkable how the Jews and Hindus maintained their identity in the face of continuous oppression and deprivation. The agony and anguish of their people when their places of worship were being destroyed repeatedly, their honor trampled and their women humiliated, are beyond description. Yet, centuries of such horrors failed to subjugate these heroic people. The way in which they survived 'Holocausts' is really admirable. Perhaps it was possible because of their adherence to the values and ideals of Calanus.

Chaim Rabin explores the contact between the two cultures at the level of language. His essay brings out the ancient link between Israel and India. Many loan words from Indo-Aryan tradition are found in the Hebrew Bible. Ships used to bring cargo from India during Solomon's reign. The Tamil poem describing a maiden's complaint against her long absent lover in foreign lands bears a similarity to the "Song of Songs" of the Bible. Indian names of wares also passed into the Aramaic and Hebrew through trade connections. Moral stories translated into Hebrew from Arabic were later found to have originated in India.

The essay "Abraham and the Upanishads" by David Flusser highlights the influence of the Upanishads on Abraham's discovery of monotheism. The Jewish "legend of light" and the Indian tale of the "mouse maiden" bear a close resemblance to each other. Abraham's search is also central to the Upanishads, and has its parallel in the dialogue between Janaka and Yajñavalkya. Flusser admits that the recognition of this similarity constituted the first steps in his journey to India.

Bernard S. Jackson explores the relation between Dharma, custom and law in his essay "From Dharma to Law." Dharma, unlike custom which is changeable according to the locale, is eternal and unitary and not legally binding. According to Jackson, the Indian model has significant parallels in the ancient Near East and in Jewish law.

The essay "Vedas and Torah: The Word Embodied in Scripture" by Barbara A. Holdrege is the most original and stimulating, and provides an

interesting ground for further dialogue. Employing the method of comparative historical analysis, the author explores the structural affiliates in the symbol systems associated with the two traditions and also highlights their differences. It would be gross over-simplification to regard them as totally different. Hinduism and Judaism both contain diverse sects, beliefs and practices. Though there is conglomeration of heterogeneous tendencies, they may be described as two species of the same genus and represent a model of religious tradition which is different from the Christian model. The Christian emphasis on categories like belief, doctrine, dogma etc., gives it missionary character. The Judaic-Hindu traditions, however, give priority to ritual, practice and law etc., and emphasize ethnical and cultural categories. As such, there is no scope for orthodoxy or missionary spirit in these religions of orthopraxy.

Holdrege questions the category of scripture as conceptualized in the Western tradition. The scriptures according to the Hindu-Judaic traditions represent multi-dimensional reality encompassing all other dimensions. They are the embodiment of the Word which has cosmological status. Their representations function as living, activating symbols. Each level of the creation corresponds to the level of the Word. The scriptures represent the blueprint of creation, containing names, forms and functions of all living beings. Writing or reciting them has cosmic ramifications and is tantamount to making God himself.

However, there are significant differences with regard to the theory of language. The oral and auditory aspects of the word are important in the Brahmanic tradition. But the rabbinical tradition gives primacy to the written and visual aspects. While the phonic dimension and the vowels play key roles in the Brahmanic approach, the rabbinical tradition emphasizes the cognitive aspect and assigns special status to the script, shape and significance of the letter. The Torah contains only consonants and no vowels.

The two essays by Elizabeth C. Visuvalingam and Charles Mopsik provide a sound basis for comparative study of the ritual sex in the Tantra and Kabbalah. The Tantric concept of concrete union does not exclude difference, but represents complete harmony of the opposites, the male and the female. The Tantras do not subscribe to the notion of pure/impure. They regard the dichotomy of the pure and impure itself as the ultimate impurity. The experience of integral unity by the Yogi during the Kula ritual of sex-union is realized within the body itself. Scholars incorrectly tend to over-emphasize the notion of 'transgressions' in the Tantras. The Tantras contain a variety of disciplines and practices. While some of these may be opposed to the Vedic tradition, there are some which adhere to the principles and authority of the Vedas. The authors have rightly suggested that even the Kula may be seen as a continuation of the Vedic-Upanishadic cult of sacrifice. In this context, it is significant to notice the evolution of the Vedic ritual of fire into the Tantric symbol of fire of consciousness.

Charles Mopsik highlights the role of ritual sex in the Kabbalah in the essay "Union and Unity in the Kabbalah." According to him, the proclamation 'YHVH is one' relates to the union of male and female. Man's duty is to realize this union as it is God himself who realizes his unity in the human act of unification of the male and female. The Tantric concept of *Sakti* as the mirror which reflects the face of the divine has a close parallel in the Kabbalistic notion of creator as the husband and Shekhinah as the wife in which totality of the divine world is reflected.

The Tantras, unlike the Kabbalah, do not subscribe to the notion of collective or national unity through ritual sex. Hinduism lacks the tradition of 'covenant'. However, the most significant difference concerns the direction given to the movement of the semen in the two rituals. The Kabbalah aims at concentrating the semen from the brain and other organs of the body to propel it with greatest force and determination towards the female partner to realize perfect union. The Tantric, on the other hand, aims at reducing the gross form to its original subtle form. The Yogi tries to immobilize the virile energy through the technique of *Khechari Mudra*, failing which he must make it ascend to its original state through *Vajroli Mudra*. He should never allow his semen to fall.

The radical difference in the orientation of coupling in the two traditions originates from their different world-views. The goal of the Tantric is to transcend the process of time and history. But the Kabbalist regards the temporal process as meaningful and the goal as centered in the history and memory of Israel. Though both seek to imitate the integral divine union, the Kabbalist regards the relation, the in-between where they meet, as the center, and the unity as expansion, not re-absorption. But the Tantric goal is the Union with the Divine. The place of union in the Tantrikas is his own body.

Margaret Chatterjee's essay "Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Sri Aurobindo" is an ideal model for comparative study. Both Kook and Sri Aurobindo believed in cosmic evolution leading to divine perfection. Kook holds that proper unity results only from separation. His view that one begins with separation and concludes with unification is similar to the Tantric notion of identity-in-difference. Likewise, Kook is closer to the Indian viewpoint when he says that evil is the product of *avidya* and exists only in man's limited view of reality. However, the contention of the author that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the individual and the society in Indian tradition seems to be inconsistent with the spirit of Hindu Dharma *Sastras*.

In his essay "A Hindu Response to the Written Torah," D. Dennis Hudson raises some important issues which are vital for comparative study. He has critically analyzed the views of Arumuga Navalar, a devout Hindu, about the Hebrew Bible in the context of Christian Missionaries. Navalar tries to refute the position of Protestant Christians in his booklet "The Abolition of the Abuse of *Saivism*," and holds that the denigration of Hindu beliefs and practices by

the missionaries is baseless. Interestingly, Navalar feels a close affinity with many Jewish beliefs and practices and finds synagogue worship similar to his own. He has no differences with the monotheism advocated and practiced by the Jews. Like them, he also insists on the unity and transcendence of God. However, he cannot subscribe to the absolute denial of God's representation. Any use of language for worship and prayer would amount to representation. As Sankara says, symbols and concepts belong to the realm of ignorance, which is the necessary condition of being in the world.

The traditional prescription against idolatry in the Prophetic religions is no longer valid today as the ancient form of idol-worship is dead and buried. Harold Coward has rightly pointed out that idol worship does not seem to be a real threat to a modern Jew.[1] The intense hatred and demolition of idolatry so pervasively manifest through the Islamic iconoclasm in India, is primarily a result of misunderstanding. As Navalar tries to show, all forms of worship are idolatries. An absolutely transcendent God, who is wholly 'other', cannot be the object of worship. Nor can it be grasped or conveyed through thought. The transcendent God, however, becomes manifest due to the request and prayer of the devotee. The idol is the symbol of such manifestation. Navalar points out that milk, which pervades the whole body of the cow, manifests itself through the teats owing to the cow's love and affection for her calf. Unfortunately the iconoclast never tried to understand the real viewpoint of the idol-worshipper.

To make the dialogue more fruitful, the issues raised by Navalar should be given more serious attention. The value of the volume would be greatly enhanced if it could have included discussion about understanding and tolerance among religions. Analyzing the viewpoints of Judaism and Hinduism about exclusivistic truth-claims in the context of religious pluralism would also be interesting. Navalar does not approve of such claims and advocates respect for all religions. Modern Jews also do not support the claim that there can be an exclusive revelation of truth. According to a Jewish scholar, "The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word."

The editor's venture has been quite successful. This thoughtful work will serve as a valuable addition to the available literature. Goodman rightly holds that though the idea of comparing Judaism and Hinduism is not unique to this volume, *Between Jerusalem and Benares* provides a fascinating and elusive source of attraction and manifests vast and untraversed regions of correspondence.

1 Harold G. Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 7.