

David d'Beth Hillel and Jacob Sapir: Their Encounters with Temple Hinduism in 19th Century India

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Abstract

Two 19th century rabbis born in Vilna and educated in its traditionalist rationalism interacted with India's temple Hinduism in different ways. Both were fascinated with Hindu worship and images, but David d'Beth Hillel entered temples and disputed with priests, while Jacob Sapir observed from outside, composing written pictures of Hindu images using a biblical vocabulary of abomination. D'Beth Hillel employed Hebrew linguistics to uncover secret meanings of Hindu words. However, both travelers interpreted Hindu religiosity similarly, as idolatrous worship. They explained this Hinduism historically as a survival of Judean idolatry brought to India by Jewish migrants, or as a survival from an ancient culture of idolatry that once filled the world. Both rabbis also perceived Jewish elements in Hinduism, which they explained from Jewish migrations of the past. The similarities in their conceptualizations of Hinduism point to a common Jewish worldview that constructed the world as opposing realms of revelation and idolatry, and also to common theories about how cultural change occurs through survivals, corruptions, and diffusion.

1. Introduction

One rabbi entered Indian temples and spoke and argued with Hindus; the other observed with curiosity from outside. But both sorted what they saw into similar Jewish categories and histories. Both were born in Lithuania in the early 19th century and immigrated to Palestine before departing on their travels eastward. The first, Rabbi David d'Beth Hillel, arrived in India in 1828,

* Special thanks to Professor Timothy Lubin, who discussed temple Hinduism with me, and to Arlene White, for editorial suggestions.

and the second, Rabbi Jacob Sapir Halevi, arrived in 1859. Hindu images and rituals fascinated each of them.

They shared a similar intellectual and cultural background in the rationalist Orthodoxy of Vilna as represented by the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu (1720–1797), and some of his students. This form of Judaism viewed the world through the categories of the Talmud and its later legal interpreters, reinforced by a limited knowledge of sciences such as geography, mathematics, and grammar.¹ Yosef Yoel Rivlin in 1940 showed that Sapir (also transliterated as “Saphir” and “Sappir”) was educated in Jerusalem by two followers of the Gaon.² Sapir’s travelogue, *Even Sapir*³ (The Sapphire, or the Rock of Sapir), reveals that this education was grounded in the Talmud, Midrash, and later legal literature, while extending to Hebrew grammar and poetry, the biblical text, Jewish history and travel writings, and some geography and foreign languages. As for David d’Beth Hillel (henceforth to be called “Hillel”), Abraham Ya’ari in 1939 traced Hillel’s family to several generations of scholars and rabbis living in Vilna, and pointed out that he knew six languages besides his native Yiddish.⁴ But was Hillel as thoroughly educated in Jewish texts as his forebears? His book, entitled *The Travels of Rabbi David d’Beth Hillel: from Jerusalem, through Arabia, Koordistan, Part of Persia, and India*,⁵ exhibits very little of such

¹ My understanding of the Gaon’s ideology follows the findings of Immanuel Etkes in *The Gaon of Vilna: the Man and His Image*, trans. Jeffrey Green, Los Angeles 2002. Etkes views the Gaon’s study of mathematics and sciences as consistent with a rationalist trend in Ashkenazi Jewry exemplified earlier by Rabbi Moses Isserles of Krakow (1525–72) and Rabbi Judah Lowe of Prague (c. 1512–1609), who studied secular sciences in an auxiliary role that supported traditional rabbinic views (p. 57).

² The only major study of Sapir was written by Y. Y. Rivlin, “R. Ya’aqov Sapir,” in: Moznaim, 11 (1940): pp. 74–81, 385–99. Additional material on Sapir appears in Abraham Ya’ari, *Sheluhei Eretz Yisrael*, Jerusalem, 1951, pp. 820–22; in the introductory section of Raymond Apple, “Rabbi Jacob Levi Saphir and His Voyage to Australia,” in: Australian Jewish Historical Society, 6 (1968): pp. 195–215; and Yehiel Nahshon and Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky, “Saphir, Jacob,” in: *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Berenbaum/Skolnik (eds), 2nd ed., 22 vols, Detroit 2007, pp. 18, 35–36. Noah S. Gerber studied Sapir in a central chapter of his recent book, *Ourselves or our Holy Books? The Cultural Discovery of Yemenite Jewry*, Jerusalem 2012. My article, “Hinduism, Torah, and Travel: Jacob Sapir in India,” in: *Shofar* 30:2 (Winter 2012), analyzes Sapir’s ideas about Hinduism in relation to categories which I call Torah and travel. Professor David Malkiel, at Bar Ilan University, is now studying Sapir and will soon publish his findings.

³ *Even Sapir*, Vol. I, Lyck, L. Silbermann: 1866, and Vol. II, Mainz, Yehiel Brill: 1874. To be abbreviated as “ES,” followed by the volume number and page number.

⁴ *Sheluhei Eretz Yisrael*, p. 138.

⁵ Madras, printed for the author, 1832. Copies of this book are extremely rare. I am using a microfilm of the copy owned by the Bodleian Library of Oxford University. Walter J. Fischel

erudition. While it frequently quotes the Hebrew Bible, it names only four Jewish books and only one time each: “the Jewish Talmud,” *Seder HaDorot*, the *Kuzari*, and Eldad’s letter about the Lost Tribe of Dan.⁶

This near-absence of post-biblical Jewish books in *The Travels* has to do with its readership. As the Preface and List of Subscribers show, Hillel wrote his book for British officials and clergy living in Madras and Bombay. His book was not, as Walter Fischel claimed, “a condensed version of his Hebrew-written manuscript,”⁷ but a new work independent of the travelogue that Hillel claimed to have written in Hebrew.⁸ Much of *The Travels* comprises very practical travel information to “benefit the public” – such as distances from one town to another, the language spoken in each locale, population numbers, the price of food and quality of the water, the climate, the cost of hiring a boat or a mule, availability of overnight lodging, and bridge-tolls. This major component of the book is not directed to Jews but to British travelers.

Comparison with Sapir’s travelogue, which was written in Hebrew for a Jewish audience living in Palestine and Europe, highlights the differences in content, style, and purpose. Sapir wrote at far greater length about the Jewish communities he visited during his travel (which he claimed to be his book’s main subject⁹), wrote in a modernized rabbinic style embedded with biblical quotations, spoke of Jews as “our brothers and sisters,” and repeatedly referred to Talmudic and later Jewish holy books. He proudly displayed his Jewish erudition and expected his audience to understand his many allusions to Jewish texts. However, Sapir’s book also reports on “the natural features of the kingdoms and the ways of the peoples among whom the Jews lived”.¹⁰ In fact, forty percent of its chapters on India concerns non-Jewish people and their culture. Here is where Sapir’s book is most like Hillel’s. *The*

has published an abridged and “improved” (p.5) edition under the name, *Unknown Jews in Unknown Lands: the travels of Rabbi David d’Beth Hillel*, New York 1973. Because Fischel revised the book’s antiquated English to make it more “accessible” (p.5) to general readers, this version often does not present Hillel’s original words.

⁶ *Seder Ha-Dorot* was published 1768 by the Lithuanian rabbi, Yehiel Heilprin. Collated from Renaissance-era Jewish chronologies, it lists historical events structured on a Jewish timeline.

⁷ Fischel, “David d’Beth Hillel: An Unknown Jewish Traveler to the Middle East and India in the Nineteenth Century,” in: *Oriens*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Dec. 31, 1957), 241.

⁸ See the book’s Preface, first page.

⁹ “My story is only about our brothers the Jews, in places that I passed through.” From his introduction to *Even Sapir*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

Travels reports on what Hillel learned about the manners and customs of the non-Jewish people he observed and spoke with during his long journey from Jerusalem through Iraq and Persia to India, and across India from Bombay to Madras. His one special preoccupation was identifying groups of people who might be remnants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel – which was a topic that interested Sapir too, but not nearly as much. And Hillel was fascinated with anything “ancient,” such as tombs of Israelite prophets built in far-flung locations, and particularly with “pagodas,” his term for Hindu temples.

But even where Hillel’s and Sapir’s books deal with the same topics, Hillel shaped his reports for a British Protestant audience. Hence, he had to teach his readers the meaning of Hebrew words relevant to his interpretations; and he had to limit his proof-texts to the Hebrew Bible and his mention of other Jewish sources to the four listed above and to the oblique terms, “ancient histories”¹¹ and “a tradition”. My investigation into an “ancient history” and a Jewish “tradition,” however, led me to the Talmud and medieval commentaries as the probable sources.¹² This demonstrates that Hillel had a deeper education in traditional Jewish texts than first appears when reading his book, and more than Ya’ari and Fischel recognized. Nevertheless, because he shaped his book for the specific Protestant audience who would be buying it, the full extent of Hillel’s knowledge of holy Jewish texts will never be known, nor the way he would have written for a Jewish audience.

That our two travelers had learned certain sciences and languages does not mean, however, that they were familiar with any of the philosophical and linguistic discussions about India that were taking place in Western Europe. Nothing of the research and translations of the British “Orientalists” such as William Jones, nothing of Johann Herder’s reflections on original Indian concepts of “One Being” and metempsychosis, nothing of Friedrich Schlegel’s critique of Indian pantheism – are reflected in Hillel’s and Sapir’s encounters with India. Nor did these travelers meet there any swamis or yogis, or learn the ideas of Ramanuja or Shankara and their modern interpreters, or study

¹¹ For example, *Travels*, pp. 17, 33, 93, 185.

¹² Hillel’s story of the Samaritans found “in ancient histories” (p. 185) comes from bT Yoma 69a, and his assertion that “the Israelites have a tradition that Artaxerxes was the son of Esther” (p. 133) appears in Tosafot on bT Rosh Hashanah 3b and in the Talmudic commentary by Yom Tov Asevilli of 13th c. Spain, on the same passage. His reference to Israelite priests performing a difficult form of prostration (p. 149) comes from several passages in the Talmud such as bT Sukkah 53a and from Rashi explaining the word *qidah* in Yoma 19b.

Hindu scriptures or bhakti poetry.¹³ They encountered only one type of Hindu religiosity and only on the surface – the devotional temple Hinduism widely practiced at that time and today by a majority of Hindus.

The question for this essay is how these two representatives of rationalist Jewish traditionalism, with their schooling in Lithuanian rabbinic values, encountered this type of Hindu religiosity. I will discuss their encounters first as they occurred through personal interactions with Hindus and Hindu sites, and then how each of them interpreted the religious life that they witnessed. Of course, these two phases, interaction and conceptualization, are intertwined.¹⁴ I study these books through a systematic textual analysis focused on language and concepts.

I have written previously on Sapir's encounter with Hinduism,¹⁵ but a comparison with Hillel will offer further perspective on the subject. The first studies of Hillel by Ya'ari and Fischel took no interest in his encounter with Hinduism. Ya'ari analyzed Hillel's character traits and some aspects of his rationalism.¹⁶ Fischel, an Orientalist who studied Jewish communities in Islamic lands and India, valued *The Travels* mainly as a source of factually reliable reports about the world of Hillel's time, especially about the Jews he included in his population surveys.¹⁷ In contrast, Alanna Cooper, writing in 2004, focused on the book's inaccuracies. She saw Hillel investing his world with a false Jewish presence. In her view, he had used "scanty evidence," "far-fetched information," and "tenuous connections" to discover lost tribes and Jewish traces everywhere, even in Hinduism. He did this, in Cooper's interpretation, because he suffered from "psychic anxiety" caused by meeting foreign worldviews that challenged his own. This anxiety "compelled" him to imagine

¹³ Hillel, however, read an English translation of one Tamil classic (*Travels*, p. 184): the *Thirukkural*, a third-century book of moral advice attributed to Thiruvalluvar.

¹⁴ Neither traveler used the word "Hinduism" but I shall be using it occasionally, in a consciously vague way, to mean the whole complex of doctrines, rituals, and other religious phenomena that Hillel and Sapir encountered.

¹⁵ Richard G. Marks, "Hinduism, Torah, and Travel: Jacob Sapir in India," in: *Shofar* 30:2 (Winter 2012), and Marks, "Jacob Sapir's Journey through Southern India in 1860: Four Chapters on Indian Life from *Even Sapir*, Translated, Annotated, and Introduced," in: *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, Vol. 13 (2013), 2, pp. 26–51, particularly the long introduction.

¹⁶ Ya'ari, "The Journeys of Rabbi David d'beit Hillel in the Land of Israel" [Hebr.], in: *Sinai*, Vol. 4 (Jerusalem, 1939), pp. 24–33. Sheluhei Eretz Yisrael, p. 138.

¹⁷ Fischel, "David d'Beth Hillel," in Oriens. "A Hitherto Unknown Jewish Traveler to India," in *The Time of Harvest: Essays in Honor of Abba Hillel Silver on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, Daniel Silver (ed.), New York 1963, pp. 172–85. Introduction to *Unknown Jews in Unknown Lands*.

Jewishness where it did not exist.¹⁸ While I find Cooper's interest in Hillel's mental construction of his world a valuable approach to interpreting his encounter with other peoples and religions, I notice that Hillel's book does not connect most people and places with Jewish history, and I view his theories about Jewish origins in the context of traditions of Jewish thought that approach the larger world through categories and geographies learned from Jewish texts.¹⁹ There remains much more to be studied about Hillel's behavior, reasoning, and concepts.

2. Interactions

Hillel and Sapir interacted with Hindu people and sites in very different ways. Hillel visited six temples during his arduous eight-month journey from Bombay to Madras, and reported on these visits at great length (omitted from Fischel's abridgement). Typically, he began by visually examining a temple's exterior. He would call the structure "curious" and admire the "cunning workmanship" that had produced the temple's statues and pillars. Hillel used the word "curious" frequently in his book, generally referring to things that were ancient and unusual as compared with his European background. The word "cunning" always refers to artistry, which he discovered not only at Indian temples, such as the sculpted animals and pillars of the temple at Alenjapore,²⁰ but at the many tombs of biblical prophets that he had visited earlier in his journey.²¹ Next Hillel would enter the temple grounds and take note of numerous engraved images and statues and the burning of incense. Temples were "full of images," he frequently remarked. Then Hillel would

¹⁸ Cooper, "India's Jewish Geography as described by Nineteenth-Century Traveler David d'Beth Hillel," in: *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, Vol. 7 and 8 (2004–05). Unfortunately, Cooper based her analysis on Fischel's abridged and revised version of *The Travels*, containing only a small portion of his encounter with Hinduism.

¹⁹ I would think that every society employs similar strategies, as a basic mental process, when it first meets the unknown. For an example of Thai Buddhist students conceptualizing Judaism through the mental vocabulary of Buddhist ideas and local Thai culture, see my essay, "Teaching Judaism in Thailand," in: *Approaches to Modern Judaism*. Vol. II, Marc Lee Raphael (ed.). *Brown Judaic Studies* 56, Chico 1984, pp. 67–100.

²⁰ *Travels*, p. 172.

²¹ For example, the wooden coffins covered with cloth in which Mordecai and Esther were buried in Persia, and Ezekiel near Baghdad (pp. 85 and 93). The word "curious" appears twice as often in the book as "cunning"; examples are pillars "of a curious structure" at a temple in the village of Moorygam, and the many temples "of a very ancient and curious structure" in the village of Candollah (pp. 146, 139).

discover that the most hidden part of the temple, with its most important image, was located in a central room or tower. He would decide to view it as he had earlier viewed the tombs of prophets. But Hindu priests or locked doors barred his way. Although Hillel would argue with the priests, importuning them to allow him entrance, he was always refused. But he “did not listen to them” and tried to look inside.

Hillel, who had learned Hindustani, would then ask questions. He asked what a particular image meant or why people worshiped as they did. Priests or bystanders resisted answering, but finally yielded. When they did, Hillel attacked their answers, usually “laughing very much” or “mocking” them. For example, when Hindu merchants near the temple at Morgaon answered Hillel’s question about images in the temple, saying they were gods, or *deva*, Hillel laughed and corrected them: no, there is only one God who created the world, and *deva* itself comes from Hebrew (Isa. 1:5, *davai*) and means sorrow because the first Hindus knew that these gods cause sorrow to their devotees.²² At the temple at Bayoods, Hillel “was mocking them” for calling Hanuman a *deva* because the statue he “knew” was merely insensate stone. When he heard priests recite “Barahmah,” he asked what the word meant. But when they replied, “creator,” he “laughed very much” and declared that a lifeless statue cannot create. Hillel was, furthermore, “very sorry to say” that Hindus had derived the word from the Hebrew Bible, because *bara’* in Hebrew means “creator” – which Hindus had misused by applying it to their stone statues.²³ Hillel never tells us how Hindus replied, but they would not have understood his logic or been at all convinced. For this reason, Hillel’s expositions might be more usefully interpreted as arguments meant to impress his own readers.

In Hillel’s disputations, he uses Hebrew and its antiquity as an ideological weapon to deny local meanings and impose his own. In addition, employing Second Isaiah’s polemic against Babylonian worship, he falsely conflated Hindu deities with their material forms (or abodes or mediations).²⁴ Hillel displayed in these meetings, as elsewhere in his travels, an aggressive,

²² Travels, pp. 146–47.

²³ Travels, pp. 157–58.

²⁴ Isaiah 44:9–20, 46:7. In Hindu thought, the relationship between deities and their images is complex and various. See especially Chapter 2 in Diana Eck’s *Darsan: seeing the divine image in India*, Chambersburg 1981, and Joanne Punzo Waghorne’s introduction to *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: the embodiment of divinity in India*, Waghorne / Norman Cutler (eds), Chambersburg 1985. Thanks again to Timothy Lubin for pointing me to these two books and discussing the subject with me.

determined, and argumentative persona. His interaction with others was narrowly “intellectual” in that he grasped only people’s beliefs, not the subtle, non-rational contexts of their beliefs, such as a sense of sacredness, emotional attachment, community, the setting of boundaries. Hillel assumed the right to gaze upon whatever human beings had constructed in the world, but for those priests (I would guess), viewing an image in the inner sanctum was not about seeing a work of human “cunning.” It was *darshan*, viewing the deity, which required proper status, purity, and “open eyes.”

Sapir, in contrast, never learned Hindustani. He did not argue with Hindus or enter temples. Rather, he wrote at length and with delight about the landscape, produce, and crafts of India. He lauded the fertility of Indian land and the variety of its fruit, and praised at length the Kerala backwaters for their lush, delightful beauty. He wrote admiringly about artisans who produced lovely wooden chests and chairs, the comfort of riding in palanquins, the durability of palm leaves for keeping records, ingenious ways by which Indians cool their houses, the great “wisdom” of elephants and their role in shipbuilding, and ten beneficial uses of the coconut tree. Sapir must have spent many long days quietly observing Indians at their work, perhaps asking his local Jewish hosts to explain further. He tasted coconut juice and toddy, he learned for himself how riding an elephant felt. (Hillel reported on a few of these topics, but far more briefly than Sapir.)

Religion, however, was a different matter. Sapir composed four major descriptions of Hindu practice and images for his book and they express a distinct sense of repulsion. For example,

“Many of the inhabitants of the land are divided in their beliefs, laws, and opinions, in venerating their idols (*elilim*) and abominations (*to’evot*), of every host of the heavens, of every animal and beast of the earth, of the horn of the ox, of images and all works of delusion (*ta’tu’im*), variety upon different variety, as they were in ancient days. ... In every house there is idolatry (*‘avodah zarah*), the image of a woman and two children, or male and female, naked and embracing, fashioned in stone, wood, or metal, and positioned on the wall or on the table, and an eternal lamp burning before them. And every morning, before any act or labor, before eating or drinking, they place in front of them a heave offering from their food – this is the offering of idolatry (*tiqrovet ‘avodah zarah*) – and then the rest is eaten and they go forth to their labor.”²⁵

²⁵ ES II, p. 51.

In an unnamed Tamil city, Sapir was amazed at the array of imagery he saw on temple gateways:

“Particularly on the roofs of the temples of their illusions (*batei ta'ato'eihem*), all of them covered with graven images (*pesilim*) and false gods (*elilim*) of all kinds of tame and wild beast, bird, loathsome animal (*sheqetz*) and creeping thing (*remes*), and everything that is on the earth.”²⁶

Sapir’s choice of words, which come out of biblical and rabbinic denunciations of idolatry, carries the worldview in which he was raised and conveys his viewpoint. For Sapir, Hindu gods are *elilim*, *gilulim*, and *to'evot*, and Hindu images *pesilim* and *ta'tu'im* – terms usually translated as false gods, idols, delusions, graven images, and abominations. These words echo with sentences from Leviticus, Deuteronomy, the Prophets, and Psalms which harshly condemn the veneration of foreign gods and statues.²⁷ One term, *'avodah zarah* (literally: strange or foreign worship), used six times by Sapir to describe Hindu worship, appears prominently in the Talmud and Midrash as a general term for idolatry. An entire tractate of the Talmud, called *'Avodah Zarah*, is devoted to prohibitions against contact with idols, idolaters, and objects involved with idolatry.

The second passage, describing a *gopuram* (temple gateway), ignores its human-like figures and applies an animal classification taken from Chapter 11 of Leviticus, especially at the chapter’s end, where certain animals are considered *sheqetz* (loathsome) and all animals are either *beheimah*, *hayah*, *'of*, or *remes*, that is, tame beast, wild beast, bird, or creeping thing, just as in Sapir’s sentence. The phrase I have translated as “loathsome animal and creeping thing” (*sheqetz veremes*) reflects a phrase found many times in the Talmud, *sheqatzim urmasim*, that connotes “forbidden food.” Sapir’s choice of words thus turns the complex imagery of south Indian *gopurams* into a Jewish cosmology that divides the world into ritually pure and impure animals and connotes repulsion for impure food. This same sentence about *gopurams* likewise reflects a verse in the Book of Ezekiel appearing in the prophet’s

²⁶ ES II, p. 94.

²⁷ Consider, as just three examples, Isa. 41:7, “In that day you will reject the *elilim* of silver and the *elilim* of gold which your sinful hands have made”; Jeremiah 10:15, “They are vanity, the work of delusion (*ma'aseh ta'tu'im*)”; and Psalm 97:7, “All who worship *pesilim* are put to shame.”

vision of “wicked abominations” (*to’evot*) committed by the Judeans in the temple: “And behold, every form of creeping thing (*remes*) and abominable beast (*beheimah sheqetz*) and all the idols (*gilulim*) of the house of Israel” (8:10). Ezekiel uses the word *to’evot* (abominations) several times in this vision, the same term Sapir uses in this passage and elsewhere in reference to Hindu temples. Thus, the words of Ezekiel’s vision augment Sapir’s terminology from Leviticus by associating the Hindu images with ancient Judean idolatry.

Why did Sapir refrain from entering Hindu temples? One likely possibility is that he was following Jewish laws of idolatry. Leviticus had warned, “Do not turn to other gods” (Lev. 19:4), which had been interpreted in the Talmud as a prohibition against looking at idols,²⁸ and later by Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) and Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270) as a ban against even thinking about idolatry.²⁹ Then how would Sapir have justified his patient observations and long descriptions of Hindu worship? Three codes of law which Sapir often mentioned – *Shulhan ‘Arukh* (16th c.), *‘Arba’ah Turim*, and *Beit Yosef* – provide clues to his reasoning. According to these law codes, the general prohibition against observing idolatry applies only “if one enjoys (or benefits from) its sight” – which Sapir could deny. Another law, based on the talmudic interpretation of Deut. 18:9, permits possessing images if one’s only purpose is to study them and “to understand and to teach”; and Sapir could read this exemption as a counterweight to the general ban against observing idols, so that he was permitted to study them in order to explain idolatry to his readers. Other laws prohibit mentioning the names of foreign deities and approaching closer than four cubits to a temple, but permit mentioning idolatry that specifically appears in the Torah. The *Beit Yosef* permits the disparaging of idolatry and the *Shulhan ‘Arukh* permits deriding idolaters and forbids praising them. Sapir broke none of these laws, including the ban against approaching a temple.³⁰

Hillel, however, entered temples and named gods such as Hanuman, Vishnu, and Brahma who do not appear in the Torah. He did, however, specify one law that he refused to break. At the temple at Mowlee, in the course of venerating an image, priests had placed “pieces of sugar candy” on the altar, recited

²⁸ Shabbat 149a.

²⁹ Nahmanides, Commentary to Lev. 19:4; Maimonides, MT ‘Avodah Zarah 2.2.

³⁰ *Beit Yosef* 147.5. *Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh De’ah 141.4, 142.15, 147.1, 147.5, 150.4, 151.14.

words over the candy, and then passed it out to the onlookers, among them Hillel. But he refused to take the candy and cited Deut. 7:26–27 as his reason. These verses command burning “the graven images of their gods” (*pesilei elohaihem*) and prohibit taking “the silver and gold on them, for it is detestable (*to'avat*) to the Lord your God ... You must utterly detest (*shaqetz teshaqtzenu*) and abhor (*ta'ev teta'avenu*) it.” Oddly, the verses say nothing of candy or food, but a law from the Mishnah (*Avodah Zarah* 4.2) prohibits taking “anything offered upon the altar” of an idol, such as “grape-clusters, wreaths of corn, wine, oil or fine flour or anything similar,” and the Gemara (51b) to this law connects it to Hillel’s verse, Deut. 7:26. (Again we see Hillel thinking of sentences in rabbinic literature. He carefully mentions the situation relevant to the rabbinic law, that is, the altar and offerings in the Hindu temple, but explicitly lists only biblical verses as his source.) Therefore, in Hillel’s mind, entering temples and gazing at “graven images of their gods” are permitted, but touching or acquiring anything sacrificed to them is prohibited. The biblical verse he cited (“utterly detest and abhor”) expresses the same sense of repulsion that we find in Sapir’s writing.

In summary, Sapir’s way of interacting with Hindus was mainly one of passive observation shaped by Jewish guidelines for observing idolatry. He was curious and fascinated with most of what he saw in India, disapproving of its religion but delighted with all sorts of other cultural phenomena that did not express attitudes and values. Sapir’s encounter with India produced a silent picture of exterior surfaces. Hillel’s picture, by comparison, was dynamic, loud, and three-dimensional.

3. Ideas

Hillel’s and Sapir’s ideas about the temple Hinduism they witnessed needs fuller examination. To begin with Hillel, his view of Hinduism included beliefs (“All Hindoos believe in Brahmah, Vishnoo, and Seva.”³¹) as well as worship, but emphasized the latter. *The Travels* portrays Hindu worship as calling upon gods, praying, burning incense, making offerings, blowing on conch shells, and kneeling before images. Hillel especially noticed the objects that were venerated in temples and along the streets: snakes, cows, and trees,

³¹ *Travels*, p. 185.

and images of Hanuman, Rama, and other gods. He used the terms “images” and “idols” interchangeably. (Toward the end of his journey, however, after learning the concept of Brahman as the “one everlasting Being” and “chief of the whole universe” who is never represented by images, Hillel seems to have loosened a little his view of Hinduism as solely idol worship.³²)

Hillel also saw that Hindus held a notion of sacred space: “the natives dwelling near this [temple] account it for a very holy place,” and a village, because of its many temples, is “counted by the natives as a very holy place.”³³ He noted likewise that Christians “account pictures to be holy” and some Muslims consider a road to the burial site of Ali ibn Talib “their most holy road.” For Hillel, however, only one space possessed true holiness, Mount Zion, which he twice calls “the most holy place.”³⁴

In his first encounter with Hindu worship, which occurred at Cochin as people were “performing Poojah,” he described it as “the worship of Images, of all kinds of animals, and creeping thing.”³⁵ The vocabulary chosen here later echoes in Sapir’s description of temple gateways teeming with “all kinds of tame and wild beast, bird, loathsome animal (*sheqetz*) and creeping thing (*remes*).” This language, taken from Leviticus 11, connotes repulsion for impure food.

Hillel’s lengthy reports about Hindu temples and worship usually conclude with theories about the real meaning of what he has seen, usually introduced by the words “I conceive.” His theories are always historical, explaining origins, and this history is always Jewish history. Cooper called Hillel’s thought process “investing the world with Jewish presence.”³⁶ Watching the people of Cochin “paying divine honor” to snakes and “worshipping” trees, he “conceives” that the origin of this veneration was the idolatry reported by 2 Kings 18:4. This verse speaks of pillars (*matzevot*) and poles (‘*asherah*) that Judeans were venerating, as well as the bronze serpent fashioned by Moses. Hillel further supposed that Hindu “respect for the cow” had “probably originated in the worship instituted by Jeroboam,” as found in 1 Kings 12:28. This verse

³² Travels, pp. 184–85.

³³ Travels, pp. 155, 173. Also, “the cow is considered sacred by Banians” (p. 126).

³⁴ Travels, pp. 7, 103. Mount Moria: pp. 5, 149.

³⁵ Travels, p. 126.

³⁶ “India’s Jewish Geography,” pp. 31–33.

recounts how Jeroboam “made two calves of gold” and told his people, “Here are your gods.”³⁷

Hillel applied biblical verses about idolatry to two other Indian festivals. He “compares” the “custom” in Bombay of throwing coconuts into the ocean after the monsoon season with a verse in Habakkuk about Babylonians making sacrifices to their fishing nets.³⁸ And the rite of walking on coals is not what his Hindu interlocutors told him it was: a commemoration of an ancient act of *sati* performed by a virtuous wife named Nullatanga-deva. To Hillel, the true meaning of the rite was revealed by the name of the temple at which it took place, “Darmarajah.” Based on a theory of the corruption of words over time, Hillel “conceived” that the historical meaning of *sati* was worship of the god named in 2 Kings 17:31, “Adrammelekh,” known also as Molekh. The Israelites “made a son or a daughter pass through fire as an offering to Molekh” (2 Kings 23:10), hence Hillel’s association of Molekh with *sati* and walking on coals. He failed to complete his argument, but he seems to have thought that the name Dharma Rajah derived from Adrammelekh for two (inconsistent) reasons: one, that ‘*adram*’ had been corrupted over time into a word with the same consonants scrambled, *dharma* (whose meaning Hillel seems not to have learned), and *rajah* means the same as “melekh” in the word *Adrammelekh*. He explained that the root of *Molekh* is *melekh*, meaning “king.” Hillel’s complete idea, then, was that from ancient biblical beginnings, the worship of the fire god Molekh had continued in India as *sati* under the name *Dharma Rajah*, a corrupted form of *Adrammelekh*.³⁹

This clever dual-language exegesis exemplifies Hillel’s theory that Hebrew, as the oldest language in the world,⁴⁰ could be employed as a tool for uncovering hidden historical truths about the Sanskrit language and Hindu beliefs. I mentioned earlier his assertion that the Hebrew word *davai* (Isa. 1:5) reveals the true meaning of *deva* (god), namely sorrow, “because they pray to them many times and receive no answer.”⁴¹ Thus the Hindu name for gods has built into it – secretly, in its Hebrew origin – the truth of their powerlessness.

³⁷ Travels, p. 126.

³⁸ Travels, p. 137.

³⁹ Travels, pp. 183–84. Hillel cites 1 Kings 11:7 for the name Molekh, but I quoted 2 Kings 23:10 to show the ritual involved in worshipping him.

⁴⁰ Travels, p. 207: “The Hebrew language was spoken before the confounding of the languages.”

⁴¹ Travels, p. 147.

(The point of reporting these disputes with Hindus may have been apologetic. As a rejoinder to Protestants who considered Judaism inferior, Hillel's linguistic theories would demonstrate that Jewish scripture and the Jewish holy language, Hebrew, reveal hidden truths about the world because they are very old and influential, being the one revelation to and original language of humankind.)

In the case of the creator god Brahma, however, the name's Hebrew origin reveals the opposite of this theory: a misappropriation that does not reflect the truth. As we saw earlier, Hillel asserted that Hindus had "drawn the word [Brahma] from the Hebrew" word for create, *bara'*, "and they have wronged this word" by applying it to Brahma.⁴² A similar misuse of Hebrew appears in the name *Ram*, "who was their ancient king." However, declared Hillel, *ram* really comes from the Hebrew word for "high," and is usually applied to God, "and I conceive that they have drawn this word from there."⁴³ Hillel would probably call these two cases of Hebrew origins "borrowings." This is the term he used for a celebration in which Muslims carried "figures of men and beasts" through the streets of Bombay and threw them into the sea. He "conceives" that this is a form of "idolatry" opposed by the Quran, "but they borrowed this custom from their idolatrous neighbors."⁴⁴

Some elements that Hillel saw in Hindu worship, however, looked Jewish. Observing an Indian festival that looked like the Jewish celebration of Purim – because Indians played the roles of a king, a queen, and a "curiously" dressed Haman, gave gifts, and dressed in costume – Hillel "conceives" that they "drew" this "feast" from a verse in the Book of Esther (8:9), in which the king's secretaries sent letters to all the provinces in the Persian empire, including India. Hillel probably inferred that these letters told the story of Purim, and that Indians had learned about Purim from them and adopted the celebration. In addition, Hillel identified "a strong resemblance" of Hindu purification and mourning ceremonies "to those of the Israelites" (his English term for Jews), and wondered whether Hindus were "descendants of the long lost ten tribes." But he decided they were not because they did not practice circumcision or

⁴² Travels, p. 158.

⁴³ Travels, p. 148.

⁴⁴ Travels, p. 136.

observe the Sabbath.⁴⁵ In these examples, Hillel explained Jewish elements in foreign cultures through either historical contacts with Jews or a people's origin as a lost tribe of Israel.

A last example of Hillel's historical explanations appears towards the end of his book, after he wrote, "I have been told by many learned Hindoos that the ancient Hindoos did not worship any idols."⁴⁶ How, then, did this worship of images arise? What were the historical causes? Hillel offered two possible theories. One was that idolatrous "Samaritans who came to India in the time of Alexander the great" spread their idolatry to the Indian people. (But Hillel was puzzled by the absence of any surviving trace of the Samaritans.) His other theory was that "wicked Jews who came to India after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar" had brought with them the idolatry described in the Hebrew Bible, and Hindus had adopted it.⁴⁷

On two occasions, however, Hillel voiced an explicit theological judgment about Hinduism. This took expression in the form of prayers. The first one occurred in Cochin when he witnessed people "performing Poojah." He "could not but humbly bless the Lord that He has given us a true law to separate us from such abomination"⁴⁸ The second was composed in the course of a long detailed report on the features of several temples at Conjeeveram. After devoting a page and a half to these temples, he suddenly interrupted himself:

"It would take a long space to explain all of them and besides their vanity is not worthy to lose so much time on: but blessed be the Lord, who separated us from these errors and gave us a true law testifying that He alone is the one true God."⁴⁹

Both prayers construct a world of opposites. On the one side is vanity, error, and everything that "abomination" connotes. This is Hinduism. On the other

⁴⁵ Travels, pp. 126–27. Fischel, and following him, Cooper, thought Hillel believed that Hindus were lost tribes of Israel. But this mistake comes from Fischel's misreading of Hillel's antiquated English. Hillel wrote, "... so that did they [Hindus] practice circumcision and sanctify Saturday, I should judge them to be the descendants of the long lost ten tribes" (Travels, p. 127). Fischel rewrote this sentence as "since they practice circumcision and sanctify Saturday, I should judge them to be ..." (*Unknown Jews*, p. 117). However, he had misunderstood the subjunctive, conditional sense of Hillel's use of the phrase "did they practice," meaning in contemporary English, "if they practiced." Thus Hillel was saying: if they practiced X, I would judge them to be Y.

⁴⁶ Travels, pp. 184–85.

⁴⁷ Travels, p. 185.

⁴⁸ Travels, p. 126

⁴⁹ Travels, p. 173.

side are truth, God, blessing, law, and “us.” Who is this “us”? Because Hillel associates “us” with the “true law,” this “us” is the Jewish community, not Hillel’s Protestant readers. The word “separation” is reminiscent of verses in Leviticus (20:24–26) that speak of God separating Israel “from the peoples.”⁵⁰ So, although Hillel was fascinated with Hindu temples and was even tempted to identify Hindus as a lost tribe of Israel, he ultimately envisioned an eternal conflict between the principles of Hindu and Jewish worship.

Sapir’s views of Hinduism contain some of the same ideas, but in a more moderate form. First, Sapir never inquired into what Hindus believed – whom their images represented or what their doctrines consisted of – though he occasionally used a vague vocabulary of belief: “the inhabitants of the land are divided in their beliefs, religious laws, and opinions (*‘emunoteihem dateihem vedei’oteihem*), in venerating their idols and abominations.”⁵¹ Otherwise, he described Hinduism through the external phenomena of what its images look like and what its worshipers do in public. They worship and exalt, make offerings, burn a light before their images, and sing and dance as they carry them. His most common word for Hindu practice is “worship,” as in *‘avodah zarah*, “foreign worship,” idolatry. But like Hillel, he also imagined a Hindu notion of holiness. Speaking of the way that people near Trivandrum treat their cattle, he wrote, “they do not do work with them because they are holy to them (*qedoshim heimah lahem*).” He applied the same phrase to two other Hindu practices.⁵² Likewise, he noticed that the town of Tanta was holy to Egyptian Muslims, and certain Torah scrolls and saints’ tombs were holy to Egyptian Jews. He was reporting people’s subjective feelings about holiness, but when Sapir wrote about the “holy Sabbath,” “the holy City,” and “the holiness of the religion (*dat*) of Moses,” he used the word “holy” in an absolute sense.⁵³

I discussed how Sapir’s descriptive language conveys his identification of Hindu worship with the idolatry that appears in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Book of Ezekiel with its priestly vocabulary echoing Leviticus. Two specific Hindu rituals confirmed his belief in Hinduism’s ancient Near Eastern

⁵⁰ Or see Ezra 6:21, 9:1, and 10:11, which include the idea of separation from pollution and abomination.

⁵¹ ES II, p. 51.

⁵² ES II, p. 84; II, p. 113; II, p. 51.

⁵³ For a fuller discussion of this topic, see the section “Holy to Them” in my article, “Hinduism, Torah, and Travel.”

background. One was a sacred car festival that he saw in a Tamil city. He described people gathering together and lifting huge wheels “on their shoulders, because they are an exhausting burden even for hundreds of men, and they move it about the city on every road, with a great tumultuous voice, songs, and dances.”⁵⁴ The “it” in this sentence is a sacred car, *ratha* in Sanskrit, which, with its “graven images,” he associated with a Talmudic sentence about “an image as heavy as a thousand men” fashioned by Manasseh, king of Judah; and also with the biblical story of an enormous gold “idol that Nebuchadnezzar set up.”⁵⁵ The second ritual was the south Indian practice of raising an ox’s horn over one’s head as a form of veneration. Sapir identified this rite with the ancient Greek worship of oxen mentioned in rabbinic Midrash.⁵⁶

But unlike Hillel, Sapir’s purpose in making these identifications was not to prove the biblical origins of Hindu idolatry. Rather, a sentence elsewhere in *Even Sapir* reveals his idea: “When I reflected on some of their worship and the days of their festivals, I comprehended several sayings, verses, and stories in the Bible and Talmud which I had not previously understood.”⁵⁷ Sapir was claiming that his observations of Hindu worship could help him and his readers to understand obscure parts of the Bible and Talmud related to idolatry. Why so? A phrase in one of his descriptions of idolatry, “as they were in ancient days” (quoted previously), shows that he thought Indian religion had not changed for thousands of years. Since Sapir believed he was seeing in India some of the same religious practices that had prevailed among ancient Babylonians, Greeks, and those Judeans who had turned to the idolatry of the surrounding nations, Sapir must have assumed that India had once been part of a vast, ancient, and idolatrous civilization that had stretched from Greece to India.⁵⁸ This civilization had survived in his time only in India, and that was why Indian culture exhibited the actual living practices of idolatry mentioned in the Talmud.

⁵⁴ ES II, p. 84.

⁵⁵ bT Sanh. 103b, Daniel Chap. 3.

⁵⁶ Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 13.5; ES II, pp. 93–94.

⁵⁷ ES II, p. 51.

⁵⁸ We find a similar idea in the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089–1164), who thought these ancient nations, including the Indians, were all descendants of Ham. All Hammites once shared a common culture and religion. See his comments on Ex. 8.22 and 19.9 (Long Commentary), and Psalms 2.12.

Yet, though Hinduism was essentially ancient and idolatrous, Sapir (like Hillel) identified in it certain Jewish elements and similarities, such as the Purim celebration. Writing about the Parsees of Bombay, who he thought celebrated Purim, he added, "There are other nations in India who also observe Purim."⁵⁹ Discovering many biblical names among the Ceylonese, Sapir proposed a theory to explain Jewish customs which he thought he had discovered in India and Ceylon. These customs and names were a "trace," a survival, from Jews who had been exiled to India after the destruction of the first Temple. Sapir thought that additional Jews had immigrated after the destruction of the second Temple, mainly to the area of Cochin, and more Jewish families had come periodically from Europe to Malabar to escape persecution.⁶⁰ By calculating the offspring that these many Jews would have produced, Sapir arrived at an "immense" number of Jewish inhabitants in India's past. Nearly all of them, however, had assimilated, "and there remain for a few of them only the names of their fathers which they held onto as a mark of memory, and even a few of the customs, as I related above." So one reason why Hindus observed a festival like Purim, burning an effigy of an evil character, is that as ancient Jews gradually became Hindus, they continued to celebrate Purim and it took on a Hindu form. Sapir noticed a similar process of acculturation occurring, but in reverse direction, in the mourning customs practiced by the Jews of Calcutta: "Thus was added to the essence [of Jewish customs] a number of [Indian] accretions until the root was mixed with a large amount of vanities."⁶¹

In a chapter on Calcutta, near the end of his journey in India, Sapir openly voiced his theological judgment about Hinduism. This took the form of a sentence that he constructed from four biblical phrases: he hopes that Hindus "will recognize and know that their fathers bequeathed them a lie and that they erred from the path to make silent idols (*elilim 'ilmim*), to burn incense and to sacrifice to nothingness and emptiness, and to worship the work of their hands made of wood and stone."⁶² Here Sapir associates the gods of Hinduism with biblical assertions of emptiness, error, and lies. He was astonished, therefore, that Hindus did not convert to the Christianity offered by English missionaries. With all that Hindus suffered from their own religion,

⁵⁹ ES II, pp. 50–51.

⁶⁰ ES II, Chap. 24.

⁶¹ ES II, p. 102.

⁶² ES II, p. 109. Quoting or echoing phrases from Jer. 16:18, Hab. 2:18, Isa 41:12, and Deut. 4:28.

they nevertheless “do not become wise and do not cast away their abominations and idols and their images, to grasp hold of another religion (*dat*) right in front of them, which teaches them knowledge and intelligence to walk in the paths of life.”⁶³ This sentence portrays Hinduism as deathly ignorance and folly.

4. Conclusion

I will now draw some conclusions about the ways in which these two representatives of Lithuanian rabbinic thought encountered temple religiosity in India. There were, first of all, important differences between these two travelers – in the ways they interacted with Hindus, in the readers for whom they wrote, the emphases in their books, and in the Jewish texts they quoted. Comparing the two authors showed me aspects of Sapir’s response to India and Hinduism that I had hardly noticed in my earlier studies of him – for example, the passivity of his relationship with Hindus, his great enthusiasm for Indian cultural practices such as finding uses for every part of a coconut tree, and the amount of time it must have taken him to observe the Indian ways of life that he described. Compared with Hillel, furthermore, he seems like a more careful historian than I had earlier thought, but also less informed about non-Jewish peoples and history.

But the similarities between the two authors are more interesting. Both men found Hindu rituals, images, and temples fascinating objects of curiosity. They conceptualized Hindu religion in similar ways, mainly as actions venerating images of a variety of gods; particular beliefs were secondary. Hillel and Sapir also attributed to Hindus a notion of the holiness of their temples and objects of veneration. But the concept of “idolatry” shaped the fundamental view of Hindu worship held by both Hillel and Sapir. Both travelers considered Hindu belief and worship erroneous, futile, and repulsive, and they expressed their repulsion through biblical language of “abomination” and forbidden animals. They themselves took care not to trespass into idolatrous domains: Hillel refused to touch food offered on Hindu alters while Sapir avoided Hindu temples altogether.

⁶³ ES II, p. 109.

Neither traveler could view Hindu worship without seeking its historical origins in the ancient idolatry described by the Bible and Talmud. Hillel looked for exact correspondences with Judean veneration of trees and animals, and located the source of Hindu idolatry in Jewish idolaters who migrated to India in the distant past; whereas Sapir identified the source in a widespread idolatrous culture of ancient times that included peoples from Greece to India. Hillel, an expert in languages, applied a linguistic theory based on Hebrew as the world's original language, to learn hidden truths about Hindu words and worship. And both rabbis perceived Jewish traces in a few Hindu practices, which again they both explained as traditions that had survived from Jewish immigrants.

These similarities point to a larger worldview that shaped these men's thought. The examples of Hillel and Sapir suggest that people of their particular Jewish culture would encounter this popular temple Hinduism in the range of ways that they did. People of this Jewish culture would ignore the meanings stated by religious adherents, define Hindu devotion as "idol worship," assume boundaries and otherness and feel repulsion, and then try to find the source of this worship in the events of early Jewish history.

Where does this pattern of thought, this way of comparing religions, come from? Much of it seems old; it takes up the narrative of Jews living in a dangerous world of idolatry and impurity, and extends this narrative to Asia in modern times. It applies and amplifies the barriers and assumptions of the laws of *'avodah zarah*.⁶⁴ For Hillel and Sapir, the conflict between idolatry and revealed truth had not changed since biblical and classical times, even though there had been a mixing of secondary elements between the two sides, borrowings and corruptions. I would guess that this last component in their theories – cultural change that occurred through borrowings, corruptions, accretions, and survivals, or the diffusion of culture over time, especially through migration – was new for their stream of rabbinic thought, although I do not know enough about the sources of Lithuanian Judaism to be sure. Interestingly, these ethnological ideas were to appear in the writings of E. B. Tyler toward the latter part of the 19th century. Research into the intellectual

⁶⁴ Alon Goshen-Gottstein writes insightfully about *'avodah zarah* as a "mental attitude and approach to the other ... scorn, mockery, and contempt." See p. 25 and Chapters 4 and 5 in *Same God, Other God: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry*, Basingstroke 2016.

and cultural sources of Hillel's and Sapir's ideas about Hinduism is needed. In addition, comparing their ideas with the ways that 19th century British missionaries conceived of Hinduism – calling it devil worship, idolatry, sin, and superstition – would provide an interesting perspective.