

**Alon Goshen-Gottstein: *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism: Wisdom, Spirituality, Identity* (Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice series), New York: Palgrave, Macmillan 2016, IX, 275 S., 80 €.**

**Alon Goshen-Gottstein: *Same God, Other God: Judaism, Hinduism and the Problem of Idolatry* (Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice series), New York: Palgrave, Macmillan 2016. X, 265 S., 80 €.**

The book-pair combines several approaches: personal, historical, halakhic, and theological. (The second volume, henceforth *Encounter*, is an extension of what was originally intended as the last section of the first, henceforth *Same God*.) *Encounter* is the author's personal account of his encounter with Hinduism and a reflective account of the modern Jewish encounter with the same. Goshen-Gottstein is a well published academic scholar of Judaism. He presents himself as an orthodox Jew and a spiritual seeker. He selectively appropriates methods from the academic study of religion, avoids the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and distances himself from the objective stance of the field. He tells of being drawn to things Indian since childhood, of discussions with members of "Hare Krishna" (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Transcendental Meditation, years of yoga practice, and university study of Hindu scriptures. Later his interest extended to other religions and eventually he founded, in 1996, the Jerusalem-based Elijah Interfaith Institute. He made numerous trips to India where he visited ashrams and held sustained dialogues with gurus, conducted strictly "within halakhic bounds."

His personal journey, we learn, is not unique. After brief chapters on Indian Jewry and on an interesting medieval figure called Sarmad the Jew who played an important role as Sufi master in the Mogul court, he gets to his main subject, namely, the phenomenon of Jews who, beginning with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seriously explored Hindu spiritual paths. Some of these even came with orthodox background and learning, some attained guru status. He analyzes the records of interfaith summits which took place in 2007 and 2008, hosting representatives from the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and from the Hindu Dharma Sabha.

In Goshen Gottstein's view, orthodox Judaism is in a crisis, and this is what drives intelligent and knowledgeable Jews to seek spiritual fulfillment in Hinduism, a religion traditionally deemed idolatrous. Judaism lacks techniques, institutions, and especially a theology adequate to the spiritual needs

of seekers. Rabbis are legal scholars and teachers, not conduits to the divine, there is no place for spiritually realized persons. The exception is Hasidism, which has the *tsaddik* ideal, but the author finds no *tsaddik* worthy of the name after the demise of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook in 1935. This contrasts with his experience among Hindus, where he deems himself fortunate to have met a good number of spiritually accomplished beings. He also recognizes briefly the lack of paths for spiritual growth for women in orthodox Judaism.

A great variety of beliefs and practices goes under the umbrella term Hinduism. Goshen-Gottstein's dialogue partners are the followers of Vedanta theology, which he obviously admires greatly. Within Judaism he feels closest to Hasidism, and, he asserts, dialogue partners should be the intellectuals of each tradition.

The Vedanta (my explanation here) is a theological articulation of the teachings of a corpus of texts called the Upanishads, the earliest of which date to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Vedanta teaches a disciplined life of meditation on the source of all that is, the Supreme Being/Person also called Brahman. Vedanta theologies differ as to how strictly they insist that nothing but Brahman is real, whether they require renunciation of socio-ritual (caste) identity, and whether the religious goal is conceived in terms of a merging into Brahman or as a love-union with the Supreme Person. Vedanta ideas reached a broader public and its goals were made accessible to householders through the teachings of the famous Bhagavad Gita and other devotional texts. Vedanta teachers got along well with the Sufis, because they shared a negative theology and taught that the form of worship or the name one used to address the ineffable One were ultimately unimportant. In modern times Vedanta attracted Western admirers and became the theology of Hindu reform movements, and Western-educated Hindus often articulate their religion in Vedanta terms. It is essential to understand that a Vedanta follower can adore images of many gods and still assert that she is a monotheist. Goshen-Gottstein argues that Vedanta Hinduism should not be counted as idolatrous.

*Encounter* is an appeal for a renewal of orthodox Jewish theology. The author would like to see a recognition of the possibility of something like saintliness. He wishes that orthodox Jews had the theological sophistication to dialogue on equal terms with members of other religions. This would require giving up the existent strategy of remaining silent on theological matters when talking with non-Jews. In the interfaith meetings, he observes, the

rabbis could agree with the other side on strategic matters but “stuttered” in the face of the well-articulated universalism of Vedanta, unable or unwilling to explain Jewish particularism to non-Jews. Above all, Goshen-Gottstein calls for a revision of the theological and halakhic approach to other religions.

*Same God* is more halakhic and theological, and the focus is on the concept of idolatry, *avoda zara*, the key term by which Jews think about other religions. The author first reconsiders whether Hinduism is idolatry by prevalent halakhic standards, answers with a qualified negative, then uses the discussion as a jumping board for rethinking of the very concept of *avoda zara*. He begins with an historical overview of the concept, literally “other” or “foreign” worship. In part II he covers the biblical and early rabbinical periods. In the Bible, the Israelites are forbidden to worship gods other than the God of the covenant and to make any images, and there are expressions of contempt towards such gods and towards image worship. The rabbinic sages were not interested in articulating what was wrong with foreign gods and forms of worship, their concern continued to be boundary construction. Only in the medieval period, treated in part III, was the question of idolatry raised by Jewish thinkers in a systematic way, and their thinking was shaped by the historical context: the competitive and hostile relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

A critical term in the medieval conceptualization of idolatry is *shituf*, inclusion, the worship of another being alongside God. Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup> century), whose writings on the subject remain the most influential, ruled that monotheistic Islam was not idolatrous, but that Christianity involved *shituf*, and therefore, it was idolatry. Nachmanides, his contemporary, opined that *shituf* is prohibited to Jews because of the covenant, but that some degree of it, such as angel worship, is acceptable for non-Jews. In evaluating religions other than Judaism, Meiri (14<sup>th</sup> century) was not at all concerned with theological or worship-correctness. Rather, he opined that for non-Jews any religion was fine if it ordered their society and supported moral living.

How does it matter if a religion is ruled *avoda zara*? Practically, Halakhah forbids contact with idolatry. For example, one may not enter a place of “other” worship or consume food or use objects which have been involved in it. But as Goshen Gottstein well explains, a ruling that a religion is idolatrous also entails intellectual and psychological attitudes: the inability to take the ideas and practices of that religion seriously, to treat the people who live by them respectfully and to engage in a sincere dialogue with them. His own

positive contact with Hindu scriptures and spiritual practitioners compels him to reevaluate the received halakhic categorization of Hinduism as idolatry. In the past, he argues, Jews knew of Hinduism and other exotic religions only from hearsay. Superficial observers saw only the multiplicity of gods and the iconic worship, and naturally they ruled that Hinduism was idolatrous. Goshen-Gottstein argues (parts IV and V) that now that Vedanta theology is accessible to us we should recognize that Hindus who follow the Vedanta revere the same God as Maimonides and the Hasidic masters. They are not worshippers of “other gods.”

He asks, next, under what circumstances is worship idolatrous? He finds (chapter 13) that Jews have something to learn from the Hindu psychology of idolatry, that is, the Hindu understanding that most people need some degree of concrete representation in worship, and that spiritual progress is achieved as one wrestles with this human limitation. Such an attitude to the religious life allows, he says, for more tolerance towards the other both within and outside one’s tradition. He proposes (chapter 14) that today the critical thrust of the halakhic and theological category of *avoda zara* should be turned inward. The line should run not between religions but within them, and the category should not be static but dynamic. Any worship, including Jewish worship, is idolatrous when the intention is base, when it is utilitarian.

I find this book-pair sincere, engaging, thoughtful, written with nuance and for an author who is an orthodox Jew, quite courageous. Any time a fellow Jew is willing to get over the habit of considering our religion superior to all others, I say bravo. Intellectually and theologically, I recommend parts IV and V of *Same God* as the most innovative and important.

It is my duty, however, to also point out what I regard as the limitations of the work. First, Advaita Vedanta theology resonates with the author’s Hasidic a-cosmistic leanings. This is very well, but it blinds him, in my view, to most of what Hinduism, for better and for worse, has been and is. He is less interested in the Sub-Continent’s rich pantheon, sacred narrative and religious poetry, theology of sacrifice, great temple architecture and art and devotional and social-protest movements. He seems equally unbothered by caste, suppression of tribal groups and discrimination against women, problems that are endemic to Hinduism in today’s India. The Islamophobia of the Hindu Dharma Sabha does not concern him, neither does he worry that their syndicated Hinduism is a modern nationalist construct that internalizes orientalist ideas.

Second, the author calls for inter-religious dialogue and a Jewish theology of religions for our time. However, his theological and intellectual horizons are essentially pre-modern, as are those of his dialogue partners. There is no historical consciousness, Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, gender studies and post-colonial criticism. Can a theology of religions be contemporary if it avoids the comparative, historical and sociological study of religion? Can one's inter-religious dialogue be contemporary if one has not intellectually engaged the challenges of modernity and postmodernity?

Third, Goshen-Gottstein is so committed to orthodox Judaism that he hardly recognizes the achievements of the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal movements in addressing some of the problems that he himself diagnoses as the crisis of Orthodox Judaism.

*Tamar Chana Reich, Berlin*