

***Rabbi on the Ganges: A Jewish-Hindu Encounter.* By Alan Brill. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020. 290 pp. ISBN: 978-1498597081. \$90.99, hardback; \$86.44, eBook.**

The joke may be as old as the Himalayas themselves: an elderly Jewish mother makes an arduous trek to remote India to see a particular guru. She receives strict instruction that, in his holiness's presence, she may utter only three words. Finally standing before the revered, robed master, she implores, "Sheldon, come home!"

Jewish anxiety about the allure of the so-called "Eastern" religions reached a fever pitch in the 1960s and 1970s, when American ashrams and meditation centers were filled disproportionately with Jews as both adherents and teachers. (I myself was sent hurriedly to our rabbi's esteemed wife, who had learned about cult "deprogramming." My misstep? Having read and praised *Bhagavad Gita: As It Is*, a gift to my twelve-year-old self from Hare Krishnas at the local shopping mall.) Brill's serious, respectful treatment of the Jewish-Hindu encounter in *Rabbi on the Ganges* provides much needed breathing room for Jewish lay readers to think about Hinduism with a respected Modern Orthodox Jewish writer who clearly cherishes his experience.

Brill, who holds the Cooperman/Ross Endowed Chair for Jewish-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University, spent a sabbatical teaching as a Fulbright scholar at Banares Hindu University in Varanasi, the city widely regarded as India's spiritual capital. He is the author of two books on Jewish theologies of other religions, each methodologically rigorous. In *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding*, he explored the well-known comparative categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and universalism through Jewish sources. He then applied these insights in *Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions*. *Rabbi on the Ganges* might be considered a detailed continuation of his thinking about Jewish theologies of other religions, with a focus on Hinduism.

Brill writes for primarily for Jews, although he rightly includes among his audience members Hindus who might "find a way to understand Judaism outside of any connection to Christianity" (viii). But Brill adds another aim for this text: "an act of self-understanding of Judaism after exposure to Hinduism, thereby producing new insights into Judaism" (viii). This last category is of special import in pointing toward Judaism's entry into comparative theology.

Some readers may be surprised by the extent to which serious Jewish-Hindu encounter, through scholarly exchange and dialogue, has been occurring for nearly fifty years, most intensely for the last thirty. This includes Hananya Goodman's *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (SUNY Press, 1994); the "Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summits" of the 2000s; Nathan Katz's leadership in academic development of Indo-Judaic studies; and the extensive work of Alon Goshen-Gottstein, particularly *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism: History, Spirituality, Identity* (ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and *Same God, Other: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Brill's book brings another personal and meticulously studied voice to the conversation.

Throughout, as Brill chooses categories for evaluation, the book presents neither a strict comparative theological model nor an aim at syncretic universalism. Instead it recalls the style of

the Zohar, the core text of Jewish mysticism: walking with an advanced guide who pauses to show points of special interest on an intentional journey. Because of Brill's depth in primary sources, joining his encounters with people, ritual, and text would be aided by some preliminary knowledge of both Hindu and Jewish ideas. Brill accounts for multiple approaches within both traditions regarding worldviews, narratives, godliness, worship, and navigating the encounter with modernity. By the end of the book, we are convinced of the complexity and nuance of both traditions, and of the need for continued, serious encounter between Hindus and Jews.

Outside eyes will often not credit other traditions with evolutionary development in response to history and human discovery, while their own is granted maturation. One of the great gifts of Brill's *Rabbi on the Ganges* is its respectful understanding of the reality, for his encounter partners, of a truth of religious history: living traditions are never fixed in time nor in philosophy, as they might be if experienced only through reading their ancient texts. Neither of these traditions is frozen in its Iron Age iteration; this careful teaching is important for both Jews and Hindus. Brill's text approaches the encounter from three overlapping vantage points: texts and philosophy; contemporary (lived) practice and personal reflection on his own journeys; dialogues and experiences.

Brill approaches Hinduism with an appreciative eye, looking not to debunk, but to find riches. He potently addresses the Jewish question of whether Hinduism constitutes *avodah zarah*, detrimentally translated simply as "idol worship." Brill offers his opinion with clarity: "the traditional Jewish category of foreign worship [*avodah zarah*] in practice is a fundamental delegitimization of other religions as well as a rationale by which boundaries are erected in relation to what a Jew, who follows Jewish law, is allowed to do; it is not primarily a theological category" (168). The riches in *Rabbi on the Ganges* are many, and the text also points to places for further, important developments for Jewish readers interested in Hinduism. There has not yet been widespread Jewish-Hindu comparative work in the key of Francis Clooney's *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Georgetown University Press, 2008). Brill's book hints at where future comparative theological projects—accessible to lay readers—may lie.

Brill's language and detail also point this text more in the direction of a scholarly, rather than popular, read. We might compare the *Children of Abraham* project (Ktav Publishing, 2001), in which a Muslim, Khalid Duran, wrote an introduction to Islam directed at Jews, while Reuven Firestone created a companion volume on Judaism for Muslims. By contrast I would classify Brill's work here as advanced beginner rather than introductory.

In the epilogue, Brill leaves Jewish readers with an insight of increasing importance in the diversifying Jewish community: questioning the hegemony of "Ashkenormativity," in which Eastern European-descended (Ashkenazi) Judaisms are framed "pure, original and uninfluenced" (261). Just as the term "Hinduism" is a bit of a misnomer, representing not a single "ism" but a family of interconnected traditions, "Judaism" may rightly be viewed to some extent the same way. We can only speculate what the world Judaism of today would like if the majority of the Jewish diaspora had settled in Southeast Asia, or in India in particular. It is a tantalizing thought experiment, through which Brill would be a most enjoyable guide.

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