

revelation and is, hence, complete and perfect. In the background of this passage stands the concept of Hebrew revelation as a higher and different order of knowledge than that available to the limited human mind, for the sciences acquired solely through human reason are merely preparatory and subservient to revelation derived from beyond it.¹²

Menasseh ben Israel, living in Amsterdam a century and a half later, studied Abravanel's writings closely and often quoted them. It is therefore not surprising that the theme of Jewish priority reappears in Menasseh's citation of Gen. 25:6 in his book, *Nishmat Hayyim* (*The Soul of Life*, 1652), although he applies it to a specific psychological doctrine. In the fourth section of the book, in Chapter 21, in the course of arguing for the truth of "the survival of the soul and the transfer of souls from body to body," he demonstrates that these beliefs are acknowledged over most of the world, including China and India, and are evidenced particularly in the books of the great classical writers like Plato, Virgil, and Plotinus, and the Church Fathers. Menasseh, however, also seeks to show that the doctrine of rebirth originated with Abraham even though it has commonly been associated with Pythagoras: "For the whole world believed that souls disappear and 'a man is no better than a beast' (Eccl. 3:19), until Abraham our father came and spread in the world the subject of survival and transmigration (*ha-hisha'arut v'ha-gilgul*)." For the Egyptians, who preceded Pythagoras in their belief in transmigration, learned this truth from Abraham. Pythagoras himself either learned it from Ezekiel or was himself a Jew, so that "all that he compiled, he stole and took over from our holy Torah and true Kabbalah."

In Menasseh's educated circle in Amsterdam, in an age of exploration and increasing awareness of the world outside Europe, it was generally known that the people of India also believed in rebirth. So Menasseh proceeds to defend his claim that Abraham originated the doctrine:

Afterwards, the sons of the concubine whom he had, he sent away from his son Isaac while he still lived, eastward to the east country (Gen. 25:6), which is India. They too spread this belief. Behold, you will see that the Abrahamites (*abrahaminim*), who today are called Brahmins (*brahaminim*), are the children of Abraham our father. They were the first in the land of India who spread this belief, as Apollonius of Tyana testified, who spoke face to face with them and with King Iarcas about the truth of this belief in transmigration, and who said that they [the Abrahamites] were the ancient priests and sages who taught them this principle. And they spoke the truth because from the sons of Abraham our father this belief was newly established there and from them, it extended to all the land of India, as is known to all writers of the times.

Menasseh's interpretation of Gen. 25:6 follows from his new "insight" that "eastward to the east country" must refer to India, since that meaning solved the question of how Abraham could have fathered the doctrine of rebirth if he had never traveled to India. He sent east his sons begotten by Keturah. Menasseh also takes as a clue the similarity of the words *abrahamini* and *brahamini*, concluding that the descendants of Abraham are now Brahmins teaching rebirth.¹³

Menasseh intends Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* as indirect corroboration, for the book portrays Apollonius, a first-century Greek who adhered to monastic rules ascribed to Pythagoras, journeying to India where he observed Brahmins who lived inland at a mysterious high castle and instructed kings in how to rule their kingdoms (2:33, 3.10, 3.15). He also conversed at length with a King Iarchus about rebirth (3.19-22). Although nothing appears in the book about a Hebrew named Abraham, Iarchus does claim that the Egyptians knew the doctrine before Pythagoras did (3.19). Menasseh's entire picture of India in this chapter comes from this third-century source.

The children of Keturah thus perform a valuable role in world history, according to Menasseh. They have transmitted one of the most important Jewish doctrines to the people of India, playing their part in the spread of this belief to the whole world. The Brahmins of India appear in this chapter as people adhering to a profound truth.

Although Menasseh read widely in the Zohar, recommending it repeatedly in *Nishmat Hayyim*, and was well-versed in the classic rabbinic writings and commentaries, his use of Gen. 25:6 ignores the earlier interpretations in every way other than the general view that Abraham had transmitted knowledge to his sons. Most remarkably, the recurring and traditionally essential issue of impurity is nowhere to be found.

India appears also in the next chapter of *Nishmat Hayyim*, which addresses the doctrine of human rebirth into animal bodies. Menasseh constructs an argument for the truth of this doctrine again on the basis of consensus, and his evidence comes again from classical writers such as Pythagoras, Homer, Plato, and Empedocles, but a large segment of the chapter comprises information taken from a contemporary report about Indian customs.

And even today Indians living between the Gihon River and the Indus, believing in transmigration, act according to his [Pythagoras'] custom. And they show great compassion for animals. They walk to the streets of the city and purchase birds from their captors and send them away free. And among them when a bull mates with a cow, it is their custom to spend a great expenditure [in celebration], as Pedro Teixeira testifies. And in their hour of death, they take in their hands the tail of the cow which they have fed in the thought that they would immediately enter inside it [when

they die]. And in Cambay there are buildings full of all good things which will cure all their [the animals'] wounds and illness, all this in their thought that they would perhaps not only help an animal but also perhaps the soul of a human being reborn there [in the animal]. And thus they say that according to the merits and sins of a man, so he is reborn into an animal of good and healthy body or thin and bad, wounded from the afflictions of God. In the Kingdom of Gujarat, the men called among them Banians do not eat any animal at all. And there are among them pious ones and men of deeds who put a mask on their faces because they fear to kill with their breath the small flying creatures which for their smallness cannot be seen by the eye. And thus almost all the people of India believe in the transmigration of animals.

The Pedro Teixeira cited by Menasseh was a Portuguese who visited South Asia and the Middle East in the late sixteenth century and recorded his observations on Indian customs as an aside in a book on Persia published in 1610.¹⁴ Teixeira expresses only disdain for the religious practices he observed, calling them "absurdities," "follies and superstitions," and "diabolical ceremonies," and saying of Yogis, "What pains they take to go to hell," whereas Menasseh records the same practices with approval because they attest to an underlying doctrine which he considers universally true. At the end of the chapter, however, he draws one distinction between Jewish and Indian knowledge: "We have sufficiently proven that also among the nations of the world, the matter of transmigration in animals is accepted, although they did not speak of the matters of *Ibbur*¹⁵ and of transmigration in minerals and vegetation, because the rabbis already said that God swore never to reveal this matter of *Ibbur* to the nations. And a secret of God is for His believers."

These two chapters from *Nishmat Hayyim* show how Menasseh identified all the deepest knowledge of the world with Jewish knowledge, possessed by Abraham and revealed to Jews "from our holy Torah and true Kabbalah." Menasseh defined this ancient knowledge as theories of the human soul, whereas Abravanel identified it more with the sciences. Both, however, held that all valid science and philosophy derived ultimately from the Jewish people. In this contention, as Benzion Netanyahu and Moshe Idel point out, they were repeating a claim made by important Christian, Muslim, and Jewish thinkers before them.¹⁶ Justyn Martyr, for example, contended that Plato had borrowed his ideas from Moses and the prophets, and Clement of Alexandria asserted "the plagiarizing of the dogmas of the [Greek] philosophers from the Hebrews,"¹⁷ a thesis appearing later in Augustine's *The City of God* (18.37). Roger Bacon declared that Prometheus, Atlas, and Apollo had studied with Abraham, and that Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle derived their philosophies from Solomon; and also that the nations of the world obtained their sciences

from the Hebrews, who were especially skillful in astronomy.¹⁸ Al Ghazali made the same claim about Greek philosophy, and Averroes asserted the origin of all sciences from the Israelites and "their perfection in the sciences."¹⁹ The Jewish writer who stated this theory most forcefully, and in a form closer to Abravanel than Menasseh, was Judah Ha-Levi in the twelfth century:

Did he [Solomon] not, with the assistance of divine, intellectual, and natural power, converse on all the sciences? The inhabitants of the earth traveled to him, in order to carry forth his learning, even as far as India. Now the roots and principles of all sciences were handed down from us [the Jews] to the Chaldeans, then to the Persians and Medians, then to Greece, and finally to the Romans.²⁰

Seen, then, from the perspective of this long tradition of thought about the Jewish origins of philosophy and science, Abravanel's and Menasseh's views on the role of the children of Keturah in spreading Jewish knowledge to the non-Jewish world is not exceptional, or even pretentious. To them Jewish priority and preeminence were a long- and widely-acknowledged fact of history. Menasseh simply extended the notion to the customs and beliefs being discovered in India and China.

We can, however, recognize a social utility to this notion for a European Jew living in the middle of the seventeenth century. *Nishmat Hayyim*, unlike Menasseh's other books, was written in Hebrew specifically for a Jewish audience, at a time when the Inquisition in both the Old and New Worlds was still torturing New Christians and burning them at the stake, and Cossacks had massacred a terrible number of Jews in the Ukraine. England and most of western Europe still excluded Jews from residence, while the churches excluded them from salvation, and millenarian-inspired Christians in England and Amsterdam were increasing their proselytizing efforts. Skeptical Jews such as Spinoza and Uriel de Costa, moreover, were challenging basic traditional beliefs. To demonstrate, then, particularly from Christian and classical writings and from observations drawn from world explorers, that nearly the whole world agrees with the most fundamental Jewish doctrines, that Jews originated these doctrines and spread them to the world, and hence, that Jews have a great and splendid role in world history, reaching even to India and China, is to reassure discouraged Jews and sustain their sense of worth in a hostile world, even as Menasseh in his other books pointed to signs of imminent messianic redemption.²¹

We should, finally, notice in these two chapters of *Nishmat Hayyim* the underlying tolerance in Menasseh's approach to other religions. What essentially concerns him in his picture of India is not the religious rituals he describes, which differ from Jewish law, and not the divergent scriptures which he would infer to exist, but a doctrine, an understanding of the human soul. Although he did not think that non-Jews had acquired the whole truth, as he states in

concluding Chapter 22, they nevertheless had been given a very important truth. This view accords with the tolerance appearing in another form in Menasseh's *Piedra gloriosa*, written mainly for a non-Jewish audience. According to Henry Mechoulán and Gerard Nahon, he thought it right and reasonable that all good people of every nation would partake of the World To Come. "The non-Jew," he wrote, "who is virtuous and has the Law fresh in his mind, will not fail to gain his reward." However, by "Law" he meant a universal natural law of morality, the demands of which he defined in the following manner: "live with fairness and justice, do wrong to no one, do not encroach on the good of another...behave charitably to others, live soberly."²² Thus, a place in the World To Come is gained through high moral standards rather than through any specific Jewish ritual or doctrine, although Menasseh does foresee a higher position for Jews during the preceding period of the messianic age.²³

3. *Two Jerusalemities Today*

After 1652 *Nishmat Hayyim* was not printed again until the nineteenth century, when it was printed four times between 1852 and 1862 in eastern Europe—in Lemberg (Lvov), Leipzig, and twice in Stettin.²⁴ Although I lack the resources to find an answer, we might wonder whether Menasseh's interpretation of Gen. 25:6 influenced Jewish thinking in those areas.

A book published in 1990, however, opens with an English translation, printed in large bold type, of the section in *Nishmat Hayyim* explaining how Abraham's sons brought his knowledge to India, and even employs Menasseh's theory of Hindu dependence on Judaism as the recurrent motif of its 110 pages, expanding this dependence, however, from transmigration to all higher truth.²⁵ This book, *From Hinduism Back to Judaism*, was written by Rabbi Matityahu Glazerson, an Israeli who directs much of his teaching efforts toward *ba'alei teshuvah*, Jews converting to Orthodoxy from a secular life or from other religions. In the book's introduction, Glazerson speaks of Jews returning to "staunch observance of the Jewish faith after encounters with...Eastern schools of spiritual practice" and their failure to attain "the total bliss promised to them by their mystic teachers." Glazerson places the main thesis of his book into his summary of what Jews returning from Hinduism discovered: "We never knew that the Torah deals with all matters found in the Eastern teachings...and not only this, but it is our view now that Judaism is the source of the wisdom of the East."²⁶

The first part of this thesis, that Judaism possesses the resources to address all the issues that Asian religions address, occupies most of the book. Glazerson shows with topics like absolute bliss, karma, self-discipline, use of the mind, higher consciousness, divine illumination, and inner contentment that the same issues are addressed by Torah, Kabbalah, or (his main method of argument) the very form of Hebrew letters and words, and that Judaism often teaches the same

answer as Hinduism. Happiness and joy are the most important goals discussed. Defining the relationship between the two traditions, Glazerson uses the terms, "same philosophy," "similar," "both," "also," "comparable with," "also found in," and "common to both." But this similarity lies for Glazerson in comparable goals and concepts rather than in the means of attaining them. Since Jews possess an innately different soul from that of non-Jews, "the Jewish soul...can attain happiness only through allegiance to the whole Torah and the 613 commandments."²⁷ This is why meditation and other eastern disciplines, though effective for non-Jews, cannot bring happiness to Jews. Within isolated chapters Glazerson uses this theory to portray Hinduism and Judaism as merely different means to similar goals, suited to different types of people.

But when demonstrating the second part of his thesis, Hinduism's reliance on Judaism, we learn that this deep distinction between Jews and other human beings corresponds to his view of a general and critical difference between the two religions. This is where Gen. 25:6 enters. Glazerson speaks of the children of Keturah six times in the book. For example,

Abraham transmitted to his sons, from his wife Keturah, keys to understanding creation and the spiritual forces which are at work within the framework of nature...Abraham presented the sons of Keturah with wisdom in a form which could be used within the framework of nature and which was appropriate for their spiritual level... It is true that eastern religions' attempt to bring man to a state of harmonious balance with the forces of nature, thus enabling him to promote the good in himself and in others. This method was bequeathed to Avraham's sons by [sic] Keturah...Hindu concepts consist of those less advanced methods of implementation which Abraham communicated to Keturah's sons in order that their binds on the material world be lessened.²⁸

Like Menasseh, Glazerson uses linguistic similarities to support his claim of Jewish influence: the word "Veda" resemble the word *yada*, knowledge, in Hebrew; "Abraham" resembles "Brahman;" the Sanskrit word *tamas*, impurity, resembles the Hebrew word of comparable meaning, *tame*.²⁹ Glazerson asserts repeatedly that various Hindu concepts and names "have their source in," "are derived from," "stem from," or are "based on" Judaism. In the book's conclusion he writes, "We have attempted to isolate certain details that shed light on the wisdom of Judaism as the well from which other cultures of the world draw their ideologies"—cultures which "only have the seeds of truth which were taken from Judaism."³⁰

Glazerson's statements about Keturah's sons show his ultimate theory of how the two religions differ. "While the Hindu disciple is taught to identify with the flow of nature to achieve innocence, a Jew does so only by elevating himself above nature through keeping the Torah and mitzvot... The laws

governing the Torah and the Jewish soul totally contradict the logical and natural flow of events.”³¹ Glazerson believes that Hinduism focuses on gaining happiness through harmony with nature and moral behavior, whereas Judaism focuses on higher worlds “above nature” and seeks to influence the state of the universe as a whole (as understood by Kabbalah) rather than directly helping other human beings.

Although he once calls “eastern wisdom” a “pathway to truth for non-Jews,”³² and usually respects Hinduism’s value for the non-Jewish soul, he nevertheless characterizes Abraham’s gifts to India as “less advanced methods” and a wisdom “appropriate to their [lower] spiritual level.” His final view appears at his book’s end as a statement of Judaism’s absolute superiority: “While both Judaism and Hinduism maintain the importance of closeness to G-d, only the path of G-d’s Torah reveals to humanity the true and therefore the best way to come near to Him.”³³ This is the path given only to the descendants of Abraham’s son, Isaac.

This use of Gen. 25:6 fits the general structure of the verse’s history of interpretation, its force of distinguishing the knowledge possessed by real Jews from that of distant relatives, but, oddly enough for a rabbi claiming to present Jewish tradition and Kabbalah, it reflects no specific influence from earlier Jewish exegesis, including the Talmud and the Zohar, except Menasseh’s. Also like Menasseh, it totally disregards the issues of impurity and magic. On the other hand, Glazerson employs the verse for purposes far beyond what Menasseh intended.

Another assertion of Hindu reliance on Judaism, again proved by Gen. 25:6, appears in *There is One*, published a year earlier than Glazerson’s book but clearly not its source. Gutman Locks, the American author, spent nine years studying and meditating in Japan and India, eventually traveling internationally to teach his insights. But he now says that he was just performing tricks without any deep wisdom. He did not discover real truth until he ended up in Jerusalem at the Western Wall, discouraged and disillusioned, and a Jew suggested “laying tefillin” and attending a yeshivah. He learned much of value from his Jewish teachers and yet, he writes in the book’s introduction, “I have found this point, God’s Omnipresence, to be completely hidden from the majority of even ‘learned’ Jews...they cannot understand that He is All.” He wrote *There is One* to demonstrate this concept “so a Jew can hear” (in an Orthodox theological idiom) and also to convince assimilated Jews, with special attention to those pursuing Asian wisdom, “to seek out your roots.”³⁴

Section 126 of the book, in which Gen. 25:6 is cited, opens with the question of whether Indian gurus really possess the power to “materialize diamonds” and “zap devotees.” Locks replies, citing Gen. 25:6 and Rashi’s explanation, “These definitely do occur! Not only are they really happening, but this power comes through the hand of Abraham, our father, as explained in

the Torah. These gifts are defined as the names of unclean powers." Locks demonstrates this Abrahamic source of Hinduism in a manner similar to Glazerson's but with different evidence: One of Abraham's grandsons descended from Keturah was named Asshurim (Gen. 25:3), which became the *ashram* of a guru with "mystical powers." Another grandson, Sh'va,' is the source of the Hindu deity Shiva. The Hindu chant, *AOM*, is "one of the mystical names of God revealed in the Torah... Aleph Vav Mem." "Hebrew" and "Hindu" both mean "from the other side of the river." This all shows that the ancient fair-skinned people from beyond the Indus river who brought the religion practiced in India today were the sons of Abraham, and thus teaches an important lesson for Jews today:

When a Jew travels to India to seek out the knowledge of this power and even acquires it, he has spiritually ceased being Isaac the son of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. Rather, he becomes *Asshurim* the son of Abraham and his concubine. In effect he gives up the inheritance of "everything he had he gave to Isaac" and instead inherits, "But unto the sons of the concubine that Abraham had he gave gifts and sent them away...unto the east country."³⁵

So Hinduism derives from Judaism. The problem is, however, that "most spiritual practices today, although possibly stemming from truth, have degenerated into harmful distortions."³⁶ The truth in its purest form is to be found in the Torah, but the truths found in Hinduism and Buddhism are mixed with many errors and are therefore confusing and dangerous.³⁷

One danger is that the guru replaces God, and "the guru's private brand of spirituality" replaces truth and ethical behavior. This is Locks' interpretation of the "unclean name" of Rashi's exegesis of Gen. 25:6. Locks tells several stories in his book about misery resulting from "Eastern spiritual practices," such as being unable to rid oneself of an inner light attained through meditation,³⁸ and about corrupt gurus. For example, "The *gurus* became rich while the devotee was left with a perpetual half-smile. Many Jews ended up wasting ten to fifteen years of their precious lives cleaving to leaders who, when ultimately exposed, were seen to be demented."³⁹ Locks concludes his Section 126 by arguing that although "Eastern wisdom" may induce real supernatural powers in the Jewish seeker, these are only lower powers compared with what the Torah offers, and they are "spiritually unclean" and never bring the happiness sought.

In contrast, Locks demonstrates the supernatural power of traditional Jewish practice by telling many stories of miracles occurring to Jews who practice the commandments or follow the instructions of Hasidic rebbes.⁴⁰ And through a series of touching portraits of the Jewish ritual life practiced in the Old City and its pious holy men, Locks conveys his own appreciation of the simple beauty and contentment to be gained from a traditional Jewish life—a