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Contents

From the Editors

Articles

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Buber: Two Approaches to Non-violence
by *Braj M. Sinha*

Varieties of Mystical Nothingness: Jewish, Christian and Buddhist
By *Daniel C. Matt*

Torah-Hindu Parallels in the Narratives of Five Persons
by *Bharat Jhunjunwala*

Israel and Pakistan: Between the State and Non-State Players
by *Joseph Hodes*

Book reviews

C. B. Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*
reviewed by *David R. Blumenthal*

Shalom Salomon Wald and Arielle Kandel *India, Israel, and the Jewish People*
reviewed by *Navras Jaat Aafreedi*

Ithamar Theodor and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, eds. *Dharma and Halacha – Comparative Studies in Hindu-Jewish Philosophy and Religion*
reviewed by *Nathan Katz*

Obituaries

Zaithunchchi
by *Nathan Katz*

Rabbi Ezekiel N. Musleah
by *Steven Heine*

Sarah Cohen

by Ellen S. Goldberg

Communications

Emergence of Kolkata as a Center for Jewish Studies in India`

by Navras Jaat Aafreedi

Three tin ingots of Haifa shipwreck with Indus (Sarasvati) hieroglyphs reinforces the Meluhha rebus reading *ranku dhatu mûh*, ‘tin mineral-ore ingot’

by S. Kalyanaraman

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Ithamar Theodor and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, eds. *Dharma and Halacha— Comparative Studies in Hindu-Jewish Philosophy and Religion*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018, vii + 262 pages, ISBN 978-1-8985-1279-4).

Review by Nathan Katz

This is a very welcome volume, the first edited collection of comparisons of Hinduism and Judaism since Hananya Goodman's pioneering 1994 book.¹ It is welcome because of its range and the quality of the contributors' scholarship, and also because there are many fewer book-length studies than one might imagine. There are several single-author works, most notably contributions by Margaret Chatterjee's breakthrough work,² Alan Brill's soon-to-be-released work,³ and Alon Goshen-Gottstein recent work on Jewish-Hindu dialogue.⁴ There are other notable books as well, and numerous scholarly articles and countless popular contributions.

Before delving into this book, itself, I would like to mention a contextual observation, the distinction between Hindu-Jewish Studies and Indo-Judaic Studies. Simply put, the former deals with two religions, and the latter with two cultures or peoples. The latter includes but is not confined to studies of religious interactions and comparisons and is explored in the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* in particular, which encompassed historical, literary,

¹ Hananya Goodman. *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judas and Hinduism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

² Margaret Chatterjee. *Studies in Modern Jewish and Hindu Thought*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1997.

³ Alan Brill. *A Rabbi on the Ganges*. Forthcoming.

⁴ Alon Goshen-Gottstein. *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism: Wisdom, Spirituality, Identity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

and other fields, and the former is the focus of the “Comparative Studies of Hinduism and Judaism Group” within the American Academy of Religion.

As for the current book, after Greenberg’s concise and clear Introduction, the first section explores “Ritual and Sacrifice” in three fine chapters: one about the use of *murtis* or images in Hinduism, juxtaposed against the biblical prescriptions about “idolatry”; another that compares the “holy ark” (*aron hakodesh*) in synagogues to the *garbha* (literally, “womb,” where *murtis* are stored);⁵ and the third explores hospitality in texts of the two traditions, for which hospitality is itself a normative sacred act.

The second section is about ethics, and the first chapter, entitled “Dharma and Halacha,” very successfully introduces the subject. The next two deal, in one way or another, with animals and vegetarianism. This is the most difficult topic in the entire book, as there is a paucity of normative Judaic writings on the subject, which has always been marginal to Judaism. The fourth chapter opens an important discussion about widows, who are differently problematic in both traditions.

Four chapters comprise the final, compelling section on Theology, perhaps the most successful in the book. It begins with a look at holy persons, and the second chapter on eros and divine love is a careful, suggestive reading of *Shir ha-Shirim* (“Song of Songs”) and the *Gitagovinda*. The role of aesthetic consciousness in Jewish and Hindu mysticisms is the focus on the third chapter, and the concluding one views an obvious but generally overlooked phenomenon: the mysterious names of OM and the Tetragrammaton. This insightful essay is by Rabbi Daniel Sperber, to whom this work is appropriately dedicated.

An interesting epilogue unpacks the “whence and wither” of Hindu-Jewish Studies.

⁵ Some connections between the *aron* and the *garbha* were discussed in Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), pages 180-188.

I have only two criticisms, minor ones. The first is that this book is mistitled. As its chapters discuss the range of religious comparisons, it is not limited to Halacha, or Jewish law. The term “Dharma” subsumes all of Hinduism (and Buddhism and Jainism as well), but the term “Halacha” refers to one particular aspect of Judaism. This being said, I cannot suggest a better title, and the misnomer is a very minor distraction.

One of the challenges for both Hindu-Jewish and Indo-Judaic studies is embracing authentic voices from each side of the comparison. The current work does not do a very good balancing job, as there is only one chapter by an Indian. Despite its skewed balance of contributors, this is a very well done and important work that will advance its field significantly. I recommend it highly for scholars, students, and other interested persons.

About MEI@ND

Formally launched in February 2010, the Middle East Institute, New Delhi seeks to promote the understanding of contemporary Middle East. It is India-based and not India-centric and its main research focus is geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East including, but not limited to, military matters, economy, energy security, political system and institutions, society, culture and religion, and conflicts in the region. The institute also encourages research on burgeoning Asian interest in and engagements with the Middle East. MEI@ND documents bilateral relations amongst the Middle Eastern states and strives to produce updated analysis of the region's changing strategic landscape.

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