

Introduction

Judaism and Hinduism: Cultural Resonances

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Personal Encounters

Growing up, I had no idea that one day I would become so immersed in the comparative study of Judaism and Hinduism. It all began when, as a teenager, friends introduced me to the practice of silent mantra meditation, vegetarianism, and Indian philosophy. During the same period my friendship with a Hasidic rabbi exposed me to a devotional community where the study of Jewish mystical texts and the zealous observance of *halakhah* were the norm.

When the experimental world of the 1960s arrived in my Midwestern hometown, I was ready. I came from a non-Orthodox but traditionally observant Jewish home. My liberal parents were devoted, professionally and personally, to “saving the world” through their work for international peace organizations, multicultural encounters, interreligious conferences. As a result of this family atmosphere, one of my brothers became a Japanese scholar, while the other brother became director of an educational institute in Jakarta, Indonesia. We each divided up the earth, like Noah’s sons, and I took Israel and India as my provinces.

Although my exposure to Advaita Vedanta and associated meditation techniques is what first attracted me to Hinduism, I soon recognized that, just as a limb is attached to a larger organism, these formative experiences did not predetermine the multitude of alternative approaches I could take to comparative inquiry. Jerusalem and Benares were fascinating and elusive sources of attraction, each side manifesting vast and untraversed regions of correspondence. They were living symbols of my encounter with exile in exile. They remained distant textual abstractions until I finally left exile by moving to a living Jerusalem. What had been unknown and exotic became elevated and concrete. Half of my pilgrimage has been realized, and I am still on the road to Benares.

A History of Comparative Scholarship

In the mid-1970s, I met Barbara Holdrege, who may well be the only person whose lifework centers on the academic study of Judaism and Hinduism. I was so impressed with her knowledge of and dedication to a topic of mutual interest, that I wrote Gershom Scholem for his opinion regarding the possibility of making further comparisons between the two traditions. He responded:

I do not know of *scholarly*, critical studies comparing Indian and Jewish thought. Having read Patañjali on Yoga and some of Sankara's writings in English and German, I doubt very much whether this would be a good subject for a critical comparison. But I may be mistaken. I possess a work by Schrader, *Introduction to the Pañcarātra* (Madras, 1914) which has struck me as presenting a system not unsimilar to the Kabbalistic tree of the Sefiroth, and I suppose that there may be a number of systems presenting similar *structures* of Divine powers. This, of course, would be something to be expressed as *gnostic* structures of the world of Divinity [which] have an overall affinity in many religious systems in quite different religions (Tantra, Hindu later philosophy, Islamic gnosis of Ismailitic type, Christian theosophy like Jacob Boehme, etc.). In all these independent or not so independent systems you find certain *structural* affinities with Kabbalah—only the *contrary* would surprise me. . . . Therefore, I am not sure that such a study would do much to "illuminate Jewish and Indian scholarship" as you put it. See for instance my remarks on the Shekhinah and Shakti at the end of my (German) lecture on the concept of the Shekhinah in Kabbalism in the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* vol. XXI

(Zurich, 1953) (also contained in my book *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, 1962).¹

Scholem's skepticism had a cautionary effect, but I continued to sound people out about the project. Negative reactions generally softened quickly as scholars I spoke to warmed to the idea, offering their own suggestions and referring me to literary sources, articles, and other people interested in the topic.

As I began to search I realized that a fuller presentation of the history of the idea of comparing Hinduism and Judaism was a desideratum for any future discourse between these two great traditions. The idea of comparing Judaism and Hinduism is not unique to this volume. In fact, such comparisons have been an important thread woven into the fabric of Western intellectual thinking for centuries. Placing Hinduism and Judaism side by side has played an important part in European discussions of spirituality, primitivism, idolatry, theories of language and race origins, universalism and particularism, comparative mythology, and oriental studies.

Although conscious comparisons between Hinduism and Judaism started at least two thousand years ago, as discussed by Francis Schmidt in our volume, the theme was only treated substantially from the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment onward, when direct exposure to Indian texts and culture became possible. The fascinating historical details of this European encounter with India can be found in the comprehensive works of Raymond Schwab, Donald Lach, Wilhelm Halbfass, and others.²

In these studies I found the juxtaposition of biblical and Indian ideas used for a variety of theological and ideological purposes. The role and meaning of biblical scriptures, and the Jewish and Christian conceptions of God, were the epistemological counterpoints or ontological foundations for much of the philosopher's constructions. For example, comparisons between Hinduism and Judaism in the Enlightenment were instrumental in arguing for a deistic worldview in which the authority and centrality of biblical revelation and chronology were pitted against the claimed antiquity of the Vedas and the original religious practices of the Indians. In 1704, La Crequiniere wrote a lengthy treatise entitled, *The Agreement of the Customs of the East-Indians with those of the Jews, and other Ancient People*.³ This French author sought to reconcile Hindu spiritual practices with deistic concepts similar to John Toland's views of a universalistic deism substantiated through studies in comparative religion. La Crequiniere sought a critique of contemporary thinking by highlighting the universality of superstitions to be found in the Bible and in recent discoveries of

traditional Indian practices.⁴ The approach was so close to Toland's that the English translation was attributed to Toland.⁵

Then, in 1760, with the appearance of the *Ezourvedam*, Voltaire argued that India was the cradle of civilization, and he questioned the historical and theological priority of biblical chronology. He claimed that Abraham and Brahma were identical.⁶ Indian religion provided Voltaire with evidence of an alternative to Christianity and he held Hinduism to be the true religion which preserved the pure, natural, and original revelation from which biblical religions devolved.⁷ His Enlightenment critique of Christian revelation had a tremendous impact on future comparative studies.

In contrast, the scientist and theologian, Joseph Priestley asserted in 1799 the superiority of the Bible over the pagan Hindus in his *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations*.⁸ He used the comparative approach to clarify and locate his version of the original, purified Christianity, as evidenced by Indian practices, and, in a counter to Voltaire, raised enlightened Christianity above all other religions.⁹

In the late 1700s, with the researches of Sir William Jones and others, Indian studies entered a period of intense and specialized scholarship. For our discussion, the studies of Karl Theodor Johannsen on *Die Kosmogonischen Antichten der Inder und Hebraer*¹⁰ in 1833 and F. A. Korn's *Braminen und Rabbinen*¹¹ in 1836, serve to exemplify the more focused disciplinary approach taken. In 1868 Jacoillet synthesized many of the earlier comparative observations and wrote a popular study, *The Bible in India*,¹² which went through a dozen editions and several translations.

Despite the lineage of works we have drawn, it is clear that comparisons between Hinduism and Judaism were not the main concern of Indologists, Judaic scholars, and comparativists. Those comparisons were made when they served to highlight and contrast the principle elements of a larger research enterprise. Nevertheless, important scholars kept returning to the Hindu-Jewish theme in an effort to discover something new in their own disciplines and theories. In 1898, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss wrote their "Essai sur la Nature et la Fonction du Sacrifice." In introducing what was to become a seminal work, they explain their motives for choosing to compare Hinduism and Judaism over other possible cultures:

We shall try to study thoroughly typical facts which we shall glean particularly from Sanskrit texts and from the Bible. We are far from having documents of equal value concerning Greek and Roman sacrifices. By comparing scattered pieces of

information provided by inscriptions and writers, only an ill-assorted ritual can be built up. On the other hand, we have in the Bible and in the Hindu texts collections of doctrines that belong to a definite era. The document is direct, drawn up by the participants themselves in their own language, in the very spirit in which they enacted the rites, even if not always with a very clear consciousness of the origin and motive of their actions.¹³

Through a careful analysis of the social, textual, and material data in the two traditions, Hubert and Mauss explored the dynamics of sacrifice. They attempted to reconstruct and recreate the symbolic world of the ritual participant, arguing that the meaning of the ritual act is in its ability to transform reality for the participant. For both Hindus and Jews of the past, sacrificial rituals were held to transform the self and the world.

Other comparative themes were undertaken by Sanskrit scholars such as James Darmesteter, Sylvain Lévi, Moritz Winternitz, and Gustav Salomon Oppert.¹⁴ Maurice Bloomfield wrote about "Joseph and Potiphar in Hindu Fiction" (1923),¹⁵ while Walter Ruben explored the "Bible and Purana" (1966).¹⁶ Recent doctoral dissertations include: Michael Futterman's "Judaism, Hinduism and Theodicy" (1977),¹⁷ and Daniel Polish's "The Flood Myth in the Traditions of Israel and India" (1974).¹⁸ Mention should also be made of Barbara Holdrege's recent work *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*.¹⁹ An interesting feature of these and other studies is the lack of awareness which each one shows for previous studies comparing Hinduism and Judaism, both within and outside of their own disciplinary field.²⁰

Scholars within the traditional Jewish orbit also took an interest in making comparisons with the Indians. Although a fuller treatment of this material is desirable, let us mention that there have been, occasional, passing citations of India in Jewish medieval texts. For example, Sa'adya Gaon (tenth century),²¹ Moses Maimonides (eleventh century),²² Abraham Ibn Ezra,²³ and *Sefer ha-Hayyim*²⁴ illustrate how these rabbinic scholars peripherally imagined India and Indians to be sources of spiritual wisdom, sometimes pure, sometimes impure. The pattern continues later in the works of Isaac Abravanel (fifteenth century),²⁵ Manasseh Ben Israel,²⁶ and Shalom Shabazi (seventeenth century).²⁷ In the Jewish encounter with the Enlightenment we find Moses Mendelssohn (eighteenth century)²⁸ making direct use of Holwell's publications on India in his *Jerusalem*. In Orthodox Jewish responsa, we find a preoccupation with the application of the laws concerning idolatry and with the subtleties of spiritual impurity.²⁹ Then with

strong Hegelian³⁰ influences we find liberal, enlightened Jews such as Moses Hess (nineteenth century),³¹ Franz Rosenzweig (twentieth century),³² and Martin Buber³³ struggling with the implications of Oriental thought for a renewal of Jewish theology.

When we turn to the image of Jews and Judaism in Indian thought, we discover a virtually unexplored topic. But an examination of Hindu reactions to Christian and Muslim ideas, some of which can be traced back to Jewish conceptions, is likely to reveal some fascinating if not peculiarly transformed images of Judaism.³⁴

A critical analysis of Hindu-Jewish comparisons and their limitations provides the initial focus for the pieces collected in this volume. Preferably, serious discussions of Judaism and Hinduism ought to be founded on intimate familiarity with the texts, practices, and peoples of both cultures. This is not always possible. But close collaboration among scholars has the potential to rectify the situation and produce some unexpected results. This was the case with Hubert and Mauss. Therefore, I have made no claim for comprehensiveness regarding the possibilities for comparison, nor have I sought material limited to a uniform methodology of comparative religion. Hinduism and Judaism merit examination together from a variety of approaches, using methods appropriate to particular themes and fields, whether they be anthropology, history, philology, law, literature, or theology.

As a result of this orientation, I have found in Hinduism and Judaism two comprehensive traditions whose hermeneutic inventiveness has resulted in highly ramified and evolving traditions with extensive written and oral components. The intricate mappings of halakhic and shastric regulations covering every aspect of life engage the mind, while aggadic and mythological modes of discourse engage the heart, testifying to the encompassing nature of the two traditions. In developing this volume, my goal has been to stimulate further study and collaboration among scholars who will continue the process of elaborating and deepening the connections and resonances.³⁵

This is what I found when I visited David Shulman at his home in Jerusalem. His unassuming and supportive friendship gave me the confidence to create this volume. He introduced me to Wendy Doniger, and she led me to others. Doniger's thoughts on the relevance of her Jewishness to her fascination with something so foreign as Sanskrit texts can lead to fruitful speculations about the phenomenon of Jewish interest in other cultures.³⁶ The need both to assimilate foreign cultures and to be assimilated by them without eliminating distinctions, epitomizes a Jewish paradigm. This paradigm is characterized by exile and survival on the periphery of diverse civilizations.

This volume begins with Wendy Doniger's personal essay in which she explores some of the factors that have attracted contemporary Jewish scholars to India. For her, a secularized Jew, India provided the path to rediscover her own culture. She needed to experience several foreign religions, as she writes, to "come to a more complex understanding of my own mythology as a Jew and as a scholar of Hinduism." In her scholarly work she claims a centrality for her Jewish identity. Just as her study of Hinduism has enabled her to discover previously unseen personal meanings in Judaism, her Jewish cultural heritage, whether expressed through active religious observance or not, has provided her with the tools to draw new meaning out of Indian texts. This cultivated habit of "cracking open" a text, this *gemara kop*, applied so assiduously by Jewish scholars such as Doniger and Shulman, represents an example of what I call the "culture of questions," which I consider to be a dominant Jewish mode of thought.

The Culture of Questions

The culture of questions confronts all aspects of life with an intense curiosity, an active receptivity, and an urgency to ask questions regardless of the answers. From the encouragement of curiosity in children to the struggle to understand nature and the human condition, the Jewish people partake of this culture.³⁷ More articulated examples of this approach are to be found in Anson Laytner's review of Jewish arguments with God,³⁸ Adin Steinsaltz's translation of Talmudic hermeneutics,³⁹ Abraham Abulafia's kabbalistic technique of *zerufim*,⁴⁰ Samuel Heilman's ethnographic study of contemporary Talmudic *lernen*,⁴¹ Deborah Schiffrin's sociolinguistic observations concerning Jewish argument,⁴² William Novak and Moshe Waldoks's anthology of Jewish humor,⁴³ or Edmond Jabes's *Book of Questions*.⁴⁴ Philosophical approaches to the nature of questioning are discussed by Michel Meyer and others.⁴⁵

In traditional Jewish study, questions go beyond the reaffirmation of what is already known; they elicit new revelations of understanding, *hiddushei Torah*. The method of superactivated reflection allows the Jewish hermeneut to break the seal that masks our rootedness in divinity and see all of creation more clearly. The art and technique of questioning makes the world translucent. The great energy released from such interpretive acts spills over into all aspects of life, and then the questioning and interpretive capacity becomes suffused in the reading of other texts, other peoples. This culture of questions involves, to

varying degrees, a mental state of rapid frame-switching and radical perspective-taking. George Steiner highlights the manner in which the questioning mode of rabbinic discourse emerges in other domains.⁴⁶

Jewish scholars are, in Steiner's words, "meta-rabbis,"⁴⁷ expositors of the law outside the Law. Whether in a particularistic Jewish context or a universalistic mode of participation in larger culture, Jews find the law to be nurturing and life-promoting.⁴⁸ And in this mode, they have been interlocutors and translators for the Jewish community and others, purveyors in the world economy of ideas, exploring uncharted territories of the mind and soul.⁴⁹ Jewish scholars working in this culture of questions are a generative part of contemporary Western Indology, and their ethnoreligious heritage is an integral part of the translation of Indian culture to the West.⁵⁰ As such they are among the most frequent travelers between Jerusalem and Benares, among the first to articulate the mediation of Judaism and Hinduism.

Naturally, this encounter between the two traditions will develop with the help of scholars of both Indian and Judaic studies. The need for such an encounter and for comparative study was emphasized recently by Peter Berger in his provocative essay, "Between Jerusalem and Benares: The Coming Contestation of Religions."⁵¹ Berger states:

Put simply, western Asia and India have given birth to the two most comprehensive religious worldviews, and the antithesis between them constitutes the most important problem for contemporary ecumenicity.⁵²

*Contestation means an open-minded encounter with other religious possibilities on the level of their truth claims . . . to enter into interreligious contestation is to be prepared to change one's own view of reality.*⁵³

I share Berger's enthusiasm but differ with him in his characterization of the mediational process. When Berger couches the encounter between Judaism and Hinduism in terms of the confrontation of truth claims he is perpetuating a "culture of answers." To illustrate one need only consider the mode of discourse employed by the major Western missionary religion, Christianity, in its interrelations with other religions. Historically, communication with other religions was framed and determined by the need of the missionary religion to spread convincingly a set of propositional truths about the nature of reality.⁵⁴ Centered around orthodoxy, Christianity has tended to generate a discourse of doctrinal theology, an ideology of faith. Certainly Judaism and Hinduism also have a corpus of answers, but I would suggest that the discourse of questions predominates in these two traditions, partly

because both share a strong orientation towards orthopraxy as opposed to orthodoxy. In the Judaic and Hindu traditions great latitude is available in the realm of thought, while one's actions are more circumscribed.

The goal of this questioning process is not so much to find definitive answers as to enter more deeply into the phenomenal world of states of being, thoughts, texts, and people and then to create linkages and networks of meaning. I am therefore less interested in juxtaposing truth claims than in developing an emerging sense of cross-cultural resonances among two comprehensive ethnoreligious systems. In this regard, Judaism and Hinduism represent two highly developed cultural modes of being that comes from the reaches of ritual and meditation, study and prayer, service and sacrifice, charity and generosity, joyous dance and modesty, spontaneity and memory. An immersion in ritual and devotional acts, a zealotry for correct behavior, a passion for communal unity, a search for the remythologizing of lived events—all of this is part of the legacy that Jews and Hindus share.

The culture of questions provides us with a reasonable framework for an encounter between Jews and Hindus, an expanding encounter that this book hopefully will stimulate. Historically, whatever exchanges have taken place in the past have suffered from the mutual peripherality of the Jewish and Hindu worlds. Despite their interest in foreign cultures, Judaism and Hinduism are, in at least three senses, home religions. First, they share in common an appreciation of the symbolic power of seeing the home as a temple and consequently emphasize the role of the family and domestic rituals, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of ethnicity as the encompassing network of extended family relations. Second, motifs of exile and cyclic return in Judaism or of separation and union in devotional Hinduism express the desire to return to the home of being in and with God. The attempt to overcome the gap between the reality of exile or separation and the goal of godliness is an important element in these two religious cultures, cultures of searching, yearning, and questioning.⁵⁵ Third, Judaism and Hinduism are homes in the sense of being points of origin for spiritual descendants who have subsequently touched every corner of the world. Judaism is the necessary subtext for Christianity and Islam. Likewise, Hinduism is the subtext for Buddhism and Jainism. These descendants, as well as other, independent traditions, have historically bridged the physical and spiritual distance between Hindus and Jews, and consequently the interaction of the two traditions has been refracted or occluded but rarely appreciated. There exists an extensive and organized literature on the image of India in the

Christian West, as well as on the image of the West in India, but a systematic study of the Jewish literature in these areas is still lacking.

Historical Encounters

In investigating the history of Hindu and Jewish influences on each other for this volume, I encountered a warm and eager scholar at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Chaim Rabin, who urged me to look further into the historical connections between India and Israel. He showed me examples of Tamil loanwords in the Bible and explained the possible mechanism of transmission. Rabin found that Hebrew speakers were exposed to Tamil and Sanskrit words through the sea trade with southern Arabia during the period between the tenth and sixth centuries B.C.E. As discussed in Rabin's essay in this volume, these words were almost exclusively associated with the transfer of material rather than cultural goods.

In later periods the possibility of cultural exchange began to unfold. David Flusser's essay on comparative mythology examines the possible Indian origins of a Midrash explaining Abraham's discovery of divine unity. The story, which has roots in Jewish texts as early as the second century B.C.E., reflects a basic teaching of the early Upanisads dating from the sixth century B.C.E. Flusser conjectures that, arriving through the intermediary of Persian Zoroastrianism, the Indian version may have influenced the expression of Jewish monotheism.

The most frequent meeting place of Jewish and Hindu thought before the modern period, however, was in the country of the imagination. In the Greco-Roman period in Palestine, accounts of Hindu practice brought back by Alexander's expeditions were used more to facilitate understanding of Jewish relations in the Near East than of Indians themselves. Francis Schmidt's essay discusses how the Brahmins of India became for the Greeks a paradigm for understanding the Jews' relation to the Syrians around them, and how the story of two gymnosophists met by Alexander's envoy, one obstinate and the other cooperative, was used by the Sicarii to justify their ultimately suicidal resistance to Roman authority. Although appearing to illustrate Alexander's famous encounters with the Indian sages, the Jewish texts in fact dealt with the relationship between Hellenism and Judaism and raised a fundamental issue for the Jewish world: How to retain one's own identity despite foreign domination.

In his essay on Arumuga Navalar's influential Tamil booklet, *The Abolition of the Abuse of Saivism*, D. Dennis Hudson investigates the

use of Jewish scriptures by a prominent nineteenth-century Hindu thinker. Navalar uses the Torah, available to him only as the Protestant Old Testament, to defend Saiva worship against the Protestant polemic. To him the Protestants were not living up to their own scriptures, which mandated practices surprisingly similar to those of the Saiva community. Hudson speculates on the conversation Navalar might have had with a rabbi about Protestant missionary intolerance and argues that, although their reasoning might be quite different, they would both make similar criticisms of the missionaries and would construct similar rationales for tolerating each other, but would do so within the view of foreign faiths in their respective traditions. This dialogue has taken place only in the imagination because the majority of Jews were exiled westward from the ancestral homeland. Had they gone eastward the very character of Judaism and the world might have been radically different.⁵⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel observes:

Had Jerusalem been located at the foot of the Himalayas, monotheistic philosophy would have been modified by the tradition of Oriental thinkers. Thus, our intellectual position situated as it is between Athens and Jerusalem is not an ultimate one. Providence may some day create a situation which would place us between the river Jordan and the river Ganges, and the problem of such an encounter will be different from that which Jewish thought underwent when meeting with Greek philosophy.⁵⁷

There have of course been Jewish communities situated at just such a crossroads, since at least the tenth century C.E. Shalva Weil's essay treats the subject of Jewish communities in India, examining the ways in which the Bene Israel Jews' self-perception is affected by their Hindu environment. In celebrating the holiest day of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, the Bene Israel, as out-of-caste Indians, reinforce the complementarity of Indian social structure and worship that is inherent in the caste system. Jewish attitudes and practices concerning atonement, purification, death, and sacrifice are integrated with comparable Hindu notions and practices in the Bene Israel's observance of Yom Kippur.⁵⁸

Indian Jewish communities have not generally been as bookish as their counterparts in the Christian and Muslim worlds. Adaptations of their ritual norms have sprung not from new texts or interpretive strategies but from daily encounters at home with the surrounding Hindu culture. Their experiences of Yom Kippur and other festivals such as Passover resonate deeply with Hindu attitudes and behaviors. The

idea of resonance is implicit in the work of Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg, who in their work on the Cochin Jews develop a useful concept of foregrounding and backgrounding to explain the manner in which Jewish cultural resources are amplified or attenuated as a means of creative adaptation to the dominant Hindu culture.

In their *minhagim* the Cochin Jews have foregrounded the symbols of purity and nobility inherent in Judaism at the same time as they have adapted some of the priestly and royal symbols of Hinduism, making for one of the most exotic systems of Jewish observance found anywhere in the Diaspora. On the one hand, they have appropriated certain Brahmanical symbols of purity in their unique Passover observances. On the other hand, they have adapted aspects of the Nāyars' symbols of royalty and prosperity in their unique Simchat Torah observances as well as in their marriage customs. Moreover, they manage this syncretism judiciously so as not to contravene *halacha*. . . .

Judaism has ample indigenous resources that could easily be assimilated to the Brahmanical priestly-ascetic symbols, including: (1) a hereditary priesthood of *kohanim*, paralleling the Brāhmins; (2) a fastidious system of laws of *kashruth*, or dietary regulations; (3) complex laws governing family purity; and (4) ascetic tendencies in certain holidays, especially Passover and Yom Kippur. At the same time, Judaism has other resources comparable to the noble-kingly symbols of the Nayars, including: (1) the royalty symbolism (*malchut*) of the High Holy Days; (2) the resemblances between the Torah processions (*haqafot* or *rodeamentos*) of Simchat Torah and Hinduism's deity processions; and (3) the royalty symbolism traditionally ascribed to brides and bridegrooms. The *minhagim* of the Cochin Jews represent a creative synthesis that accentuates Jewish traditions connected with these two symbol complexes, while at the same time incorporating comparable elements from Hindu traditions.⁵⁹

Phenomenological Resonances

The essays in the second part of the volume are concerned primarily with cultural resonances among the Judaic and Hindu traditions, rather than with actual points of historical encounter. Much hair-splitting has been directed to the question of what are the reasonable,

essential rules for comparing two apparently similar complexes of ideas or practices.⁶⁰ Is the mystical experience in Judaism the “same” as in Hinduism? Are the conceptions of purity and impurity comparable in the scriptures and practices of the two religions? While the debate goes on, I would like to take a less categorical approach by which we can avoid endless discussions of the point-by-point correspondences or disparities between the Judaic and Hindu traditions. It is sufficient that we learn about each tradition as much as possible on its own terms and then examine resonances as well as divergences among certain ideas and practices of the two traditions. One attains an understanding of the points of intersection among two traditions not so much through an awareness of the “totality” of each tradition as through a receptivity to specific meaningful resonances or counterpoints.⁶¹

Barbara Holdrege’s essay is a comparative analysis of the role of scripture in the Brahmanical tradition and the rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions. She focuses in particular on cosmological conceptions of scripture in which Veda and Torah, respectively, are depicted not merely as a circumscribed corpus of texts, but as a multileveled cosmic reality that encompasses both historical and transmundane dimensions. She argues that the sacred status, authority, and function of scripture in these traditions are to a certain extent shaped by these conceptions, and thus such a study is essential to understanding the role of Veda and Torah as the paradigmatic symbols of their respective traditions.

Bernard Jackson’s essay examines the extent to which legal regulations, customs, and royal ordinances in *halakhah* and *dharmaśāstra* are binding on members of their respective societies. Jackson suggests that both Jewish and Hindu law evidence a great sensitivity to the interplay of local custom and authoritative law. He evaluates this interplay by gauging when a law on the books was practiced and when it fell out of use and why. He finds that it is related, in both Jewish and Hindu legal texts, to whether a custom abrogates or suspends a religious duty and whether the law is able to unify a multiplicity of local customs. Given that *dharma* as defined in Hindu law codes is not necessarily legally binding, a central question must be asked regarding the comparison of Hindu and Jewish law: How does the ideal conform to or diverge from the actual in the Hindu and Jewish cases? Jackson observes that in both cases the writing down of a collection of norms did not necessarily mean that all or even most norms were even intended to be enforced; even the laws connected with royal authority were not necessarily statutory. Jackson thus concludes that authority should not necessarily be equated with legal enforcement in the ancient world.

The essays on union and unity in the Tantric and kabbalistic traditions represent a collaborative effort by Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam and Charles Mopsik. While focusing exclusively on their own areas of expertise—the Tantric and kabbalistic traditions, respectively—they were asked nevertheless to keep in mind the comparative problematics of their project.

Chalier-Visuvalingam's study of union and unity in Tantric Hinduism examines the transformation of the concept of union from the absolute transcendent Other, beyond individuality and plurality, to its immanent contextualization in Tantric practices of sexual unity. The various processes of ascent and descent along the axis of *chakras* in the subtle physiology are examined in several highly charged contexts, with emphasis on the use of the body to reach an effective unification with the absolute. The ritualized sexual union of *kulayāga* is interpreted as an internalization of the Vedic fire-sacrifice.

Mopsik examines the Jewish aspiration for union within the kabbalistic mode. The seeker of unity with God engages himself in acts that parallel the sefirotic structure of the divine pleroma. The ascents and descents along the sefirotic ladder are accomplished by particular mental and physical acts of unification. Mopsik uses kabbalistic texts to show how the image of male-female coupling facilitates the process of connecting the seeker with a higher unity. This higher unity comes through a unification with the manifest emanations of the sefirotic realm rather than through a transcendence of the pluralistic phenomenal world. In this respect, the Tantric and kabbalistic models share a common interest in using the phenomenal world, structured by the hierarchical but dynamic ladders of *cakras* and *sefirot*, respectively, to ascend and descend into and out of unity. In both traditions this experience of unity is depicted as transforming both the individual and the world, raising them eventually to the highest possible level of union.

The volume concludes with Margaret Chatterjee's exploration of two of this century's most creative mystical teachers in India and Israel: Sri Aurobindo Ghose and Abraham Isaac Kook. Had Aurobindo and Kook encountered each other they would have had much in common to talk about: the mystical worlds they inhabited, their concepts of an evolving spirituality, their use of traditional religious discourse, and their simultaneous and energetic entrance into the course of modern history. Chatterjee's exploration of the shared spiritual landscapes of Aurobindo and Kook represents in some ways a culmination of all the separate strands contained in this volume. We are given a glimpse of what the future might look like if such great souls encountered each other at home, in Jerusalem and Benares.