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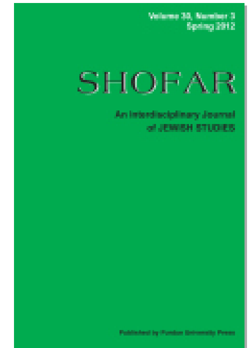

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Hinduism, Torah, and Travel: Jacob Sapir in India

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Addressing questions of comparative religion and the phenomenology of travel, this essay analyzes Rabbi Jacob Sapir's encounter with Hinduism during his travels in India in 1859–61. The introduction of his travelogue, *Even Sapir*, sets up an opposition between the study of Torah in Jerusalem, his home, on the one side, over against outward travel and the traveler's mind, on the other. Sapir's experience of India and especially Hinduism centered on this duality, so that he viewed Hinduism through the rabbinic category and vocabulary of idolatry, and travel meant wandering in exile. But Sapir bridged the two perspectives in various ways detailed in this essay, such as applying a concept of perceptual holiness to Hindu practices, and his reports of Indian life and Hindu religion sometimes transcended pre-judgments and expressed attentive interest in foreign life observed beyond home and study-house.

In 1858 one of the Jewish communities of Jerusalem sent a rabbi to India to raise money from the wealthy Jews residing there. After touring Egypt and observing the Jews of Yemen, this rabbi, named Jacob Sapir, arrived in Bombay in November of 1859 and stayed there half a year, then traveled by ship to Cochin. Two months later he hired passage on a ship bound for Calcutta, but the monsoon rains blocked the harbor. It then took him six weeks to reach Madras, traveling by fishing barge on the Kerala backwaters past Allepey to Trivandrum, and then by ox cart around the southern cape and through the Tamil plains to Tuticorin, and eventually up to Madras. From here he sailed to Calcutta in August of 1860, staying there for ten more months.

This article revises and expands upon a paper presented in the Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Group at the 2008 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

After returning home, Sapir composed a Hebrew-language narrative of his travels titled *Even Sapir* (published in two volumes, 1866 and 1874),[1] in which he portrayed himself as an explorer searching out and telling the story of "our brothers and our people" in distant lands. He also devoted many pages to non-Jewish peoples and places; for example, forty percent of the book's Indian section describes Indian culture, history, and natural features, including Hindu religious life.

The question for this essay is how Jacob Sapir—raised in an inward-looking Jewish community, a scholar immersed in Jewish religious literature—interpreted the Hinduism which he encountered in India. This initial study of Sapir's thought will focus mainly on how he himself conceptualized and expressed his encounter with Indian culture, particularly in regard to the categories of Torah and travel found in his writings. I shall also compare his ideas about Hinduism with those of some earlier and contemporary Jewish authors.

Jerusalem and Torah

Rabbi Jacob Sapir Ha-Levi was born in Lithuania in 1822, immigrated with his parents in 1832 to Safed in Palestine, and after their deaths soon afterwards was raised and educated by the *Perushi* community of Jerusalem, most of whom had emigrated from Lithuania and western Belorussia.[2] According to Yosef Yoel Rivlin, author of the most important study of Sapir (published

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[1]*Even Sapir*, Vol. I (Lyck: L. Silbermann, 1866) and Vol. II (Mainz: Yehiel Brill, 1874).

[2]The most important and comprehensive study of Sapir was written by Y. Y. Rivlin, "R. Ya`aqov Sapir," *Moznaim*, Vol. 11 (1940): 74–81, 385–99. For a short summary and discussion of *Even Sapir*, see Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1936), Vol. 3, pp. 632–36. Some additional material on Sapir appears in A. Yaari, *Sheluhei Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1951), pp. 820–22; in the introductory section of Raymond Apple, "Rabbi Jacob Levi Saphir and His Voyage to Australia," *Australian Jewish Historical Society*, Vol. 6 (1968): 195–215; and Yehiel Nahshon and Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky, "Saphir, Jacob," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, eds. Berenbaum and Skolnik, 2nd ed. 22 vols. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 18: 35–36. Noah S. Gerber studied Sapir in his recent master's thesis, "Jacob Sapir and the Beginning of the Scholarly Study of Yemenite Jewry" (in Hebrew; Hebrew Univ. of Jerusalem, 2003; my thanks to Yehuda Herskowitz for alerting me), which situates Sapir's descriptions of Yemenite Jews within the general history of the study of this group and analyzes his portrayal of them through categories of ethnology and anthropology as these academic fields were developing in his time and later. Gerber's single chapter on Sapir interprets him as a "participant-observing" ethnographer of other Jews, whereas I frame his chapters on India through categories of comparative religion (interpreting other people's religions) and the phenomenology of travel.

in 1940), his two teachers in Jerusalem, Rabbi Hillel Rivlin and Rabbi Yosef Zundl Salant, educated him "in accord with the system of the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu" (called the Gaon of Vilna, 1720–1797), combining holy and secular literature. In addition to their expertise in all the Jewish legal writings, Hillel Rivlin knew natural history and medicine and read classical literature in Greek, and Salant studied the biblical text, knew some sciences and foreign languages, and was a fluent writer.[3] Jacob Sapir's education reflected that of his teachers: based mainly in the Talmud, Midrash, and later legal literature, it extended to Hebrew grammar and poetry, the biblical text, the letters of Maimonides, Jewish history and travel writings,[4] and some geography and foreign languages, particularly Arabic, which he spoke fluently. He claimed even to have read the Quran and a few other Muslim books. But Sapir had studied no European books of philosophy or history, and no European works on Islam or Hinduism.[5] The historian Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) criticized Sapir's writings for being "very naïve" and "little versed in history and geography."[6] Yosef Rivlin, on the other hand, viewed Sapir as "a man of sharp observation" who possessed a "scientific system" of knowledge derived from the "system of the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu."[7]

Two nineteenth-century memoirs claim that most Ashkenazi Jews of Jerusalem never left the city, had no knowledge of history or geography, and could

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[3]Rivlin, "R. Ya`aqov Sapir," p. 77. As Etkes has demonstrated in *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image* (trans. Jeffrey Green. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), Rivlin's simple (and modernist) formulation of the Gaon's "system" of combining holy and secular studies is problematic.

[4]Such as *Yossifon*, and the travel writings of Benjamin of Tudela (*Even Sapir*, I:8b, 45b, 47b, etc.) and Obadiah of Bertinoro ("in his travels from Italy to Jerusalem," I:3a, 20b, etc.).

[5]He did, however, refer several times in *Even Sapir* to "books of the travelers" (*sifrei ha-tarim*) and to "explorers of the world and travelers of the lands" without identifying any of them; for example: I:3b and I:8b.

[6]Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte des judischen Volkes*, trans. A. Steinberg (Berlin: Judischer Verlag, 1929), Vol. 9, pp. 497–98. In a book review, Abraham Geiger criticized Sapir for his simplistic use of evidence, such as grave markers, for determining historical dates (Geiger, *Judische Zeitschrift fur Wissenschaft und Leben*, Vol. 1 [Breslau, 1875], pp. 263–70).

[7]Rivlin, "R. Ya`aqov Sapir," p. 387. Rivlin seems to have considered Sapir a crypto-*maskil*. However, Sapir's relationship with *Haskalah*, the modernist Jewish movement for philosophical and social "enlightenment," is complex and needs more careful examination.

not speak languages other than Yiddish and Hebrew.[8] Yosef Rivlin wrote of the love for Jerusalem which so "burned in the hearts" of these immigrants that they wished never to go out from the walls of Jerusalem and saw such travel as a "descent in degree of holiness."[9] This was a community which also tended to understand itself in light of the saying, "The maintenance of the *yishuv* [the Jewish community in the Holy Land] depends on the maintenance of the soul," meaning that prayer and full-time study in the *yeshiva*, "sitting in peace at the Torah and prayer," were the main purposes of life in the Holy Land and the means to the community's survival.[10] Tsvi Hirsch Lehren, who administered the major European source of funds for the Jews of Palestine, believed that Redemption itself could best be furthered through "Torah study and prayer by the Jews of the Land of Israel and financial support on the part of their Diaspora brethren."[11] This viewpoint identified the Holy Land as the geographical center of religious life, so that the only worthwhile travel outside this location was in support of the community there.

What value did Sapir himself give to his travels and to writing about distant Jewish communities and foreign cultures? For an answer, let us turn to the Introduction of *Even Sapir*, in which he justified writing it, and to the book's paragraphs about his departure from and return to Jerusalem. I find Sapir's ideas about travel to be organized around two contrasting values: home and Torah on the one side, and travel and the traveler's mind, on the other.[12]

As to the first side, these pages belittle the value of travel by calling Sapir's journey "my exile" and claiming that he would rather have sat in the House of God, in the House of Study, remaining ritually pure and "filling my belly with dainties from the Talmud and the legal scholars." He would have been "privi-

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[8]Ludwig August Frankl, *The Jews in the East*, trans. P. Beaton, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett Pub, 1859), Vol. 2, p. 34; Ephraim Cohn-Reiss, *Mi-Zikronot 'Ish Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: *Sifriyat ha-yishuv*, 1967), pp. 52–53. Shlomo Zalman created a stir by learning Arabic and socializing with Arabs and Sephardi Jews (Jeff Halper, *Between Redemption and Revival: The Jewish Yishuv of Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century* [Boulder: Westview Press, 1991], p. 49).

[9]Rivlin, "R. Ya`aqov Sapir," p. 385. He writes about several men who had never stepped outside the city and forbade their children to do so.

[10]Mordecai Salomon, *Sheloshah dorot bayyishshuv* (Jerusalem: Massadah, 1941), p. 79; Halper, *Between Redemption and Revival,* p. 81.

[11]Arie Morgenstern, *Hastening Redemption: Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel*, trans. Joel A. Linsider (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 137.

[12]An odd, often brilliant book, *The Mind of the Traveler*, by Eric J. Leed (New York: Basic Books, 1991), mainly Part I, inspired the following analysis of Sapir's thought.

leged to write about new insights into the Holy Torah," instead of producing, against his will, his "chattering of words" (his travelogue), which makes him seem both impious and foolish, and brings neither honor nor wealth. The Introduction contains two long, complicated discourses based on authoritative Jewish writings—the Talmud, Midrash, Rashi, Tosafot, and later books—which show off the author's knowledge of these writings and defend his attempts to tell the truth about his travels. Clearly, Torah study and its locale and mode of knowledge have great value to Sapir.

To convey the experience of departure from this locale, his beloved Jerusalem, and from his family and friends, Sapir uses the image of the soul departing from the body at the time of death, painfully and with deep groans; and his return to Jerusalem is a return to life and joy, regaining a spiritual refuge, with the wish of never leaving the shadow of its walls for the rest of his days. Even when his body traveled outside Jerusalem and his eyes viewed the passing scenery, his mind thought constantly of Jerusalem and he returned to it in his dreams and heart every night.

But the Introduction also claims value for travel outside Jerusalem and for experience beyond the study of Jewish holy books. On the title page, Sapir places the following list of the book's contents:

> The lands I wandered and explored for four years and nine months, and wrote down in a book as a remembrance. The condition and appearance of our brothers and our people, ethical, religious, and political, and the passing events and their origins from the past until today, accompanied with stories and matters of Torah and investigations and direct comments, and inscriptions on ancient grave stones and comments on them, and holy songs and petitions and wondrous acts, something suitable for every person. Done through the purity of our holy tongue, may many wander about in them and delight in their goodness. I hope that the multitude of his words will be pleasing to the multitude of his brothers, and for your salvation I hope to God.

These words accord value to the rational investigation of the non-legal aspects of Jewish life: politics, history, stories, poetry, local prayers, and people's physical appearance. Sapir expects such descriptions to be of interest and to bring pleasure to his audience. Indeed, he claims that his friends begged him to write the book because they found his words interesting and beneficial.

"Memory" is an important repository of knowledge. Sapir calls his work "a book of my memories" arranged according to the sequence of his journey. Some of these memories pertain to his own personal experiences on the journey, the experiential "I." His experiences of departing from and returning to Jerusalem, summarized above, are typical examples of the emotional first-person narratives found in *Even Sapir*. We find another example in a sentence

about his return to Jaffa at the end of his journey: "There is no expression in my language, and in my mouth no words, to tell the excitement of my soul and emotion of my heart at the moment I gazed from afar upon this small city."

But far more often than memories of personal experiences, Sapir records memories of his observations and critical applications of mind to what he observed around him.

> My story is only about our brothers the Jews, in places that I passed through, according to what I inquired and searched out and carefully examined, in regard to their essence, quality, and quantity, from whence they came, and their manifestations and causes, and what happened to them. What became known to me from this, by clear observation or from legend and story through an investigation of their sources, only these things I recalled and recorded.

Elsewhere in the Introduction, Sapir appeals to the truth of empirical observation: "I described every place and every person in the way that it was there before my eyes, and may the God of truth guide me on the path of truth." Repeatedly in his Introduction, Sapir justifies his book as "truth," based on direct eyesight or critical examination of evidence. This is a truth not in conflict with the truth of Torah and other holy books, but in a different sphere of thought demanding different tools of thought. But it too is guided by "the God of truth."

How did Sapir justify remembering the non-Jews he encountered on his travels? He writes: "And after these matters [foreign Jews], if the subject drew me, I recalled in a very brief manner also some of the natural features of the kingdoms and the ways of the peoples among whom the Jews lived. Because even from this, there sometimes comes forth some benefit for historians or those who investigate ancient things." Clearly Sapir means to ascribe to his descriptions of non-Jews a lower order of importance, useful only to historians and antiquarians; but oddly, he actually devotes large portions of his book to foreign geography and culture.

The Introduction to *Even Sapir* thus gives value not only to Torah-study and home, centered in the author's beloved Jerusalem, but also and at the same time, to traveling outward and its alternative modes of life and mind: observation, investigation of physical evidence, and personal experiences in the world "out there." Sapir bridges these contrasts through objects that share both worlds. Foreign Jews are not only "our brothers and our people" (the familiar "us") but foreigners who live far beyond Jerusalem and follow ways of life unfamiliar to European Jews. Their songs and prayers are valuable to study

and will inspire his readers in the service of God,[13] but they also differ from what his readers know. Moreover, "the purity of our holy tongue," Hebrew, will describe foreign, sometimes impure, realities. In the Introduction, Sapir applies the term "purity" to both the ritual state of staying in the house of God in Jerusalem, and to the Hebrew language which describes experiences outside of this pure locale. By remembering the mercies of God in his travelogue, Sapir further bridges study-house and travel, through the concept of a God discovered not only in Torah-study but in acts of divine intervention on behalf of pious travelers. This God, "who watches over the steps of human beings," sent a morning wind on the day of Sapir's departure from Jerusalem, which "drew me out into the work of the treasured holy assembly," to raise funds for its synagogue and its education in Torah and for the sustenance of its people. Hence, Sapir's travel, wherever he goes to collect money for his holy community at home, has a holy function. And finally, Sapir expands the concept of Torah-study itself when he makes the following claim about foreign scenes he observed during his travels: "If I saw a new or strange thing, I collected it [for my book]. Sometimes I learned from this about a certain law (*halakhah*) or the literal meaning of a biblical verse (*peshat*) or an understanding, and I inscribed it for a remembrance." Repeatedly in *Even Sapir*, and even in the section on India, our author connects "new or strange" sites and behavior with certain words in the Torah, in an ongoing process of gaining new knowledge about Torah. Travel became, then, in this way a means of Torah-study.

Sapir's Vocabulary of Hinduism

There was much about India which pleased and surprised Sapir. Using biblical phrases about the Land of Israel and Garden of Eden, he lauded the fertility of Indian land and the variety of its fruit. He praised at length the Kerala backwaters, again in ancient Hebrew phrases: this area resembled the Garden of God, full of branches, of every plant and herb and every good fragrance, lovely to the sight, full of joyful sounds; and his journey on its waterways was a repose and delight to the soul. Indian craftsmanship also impressed him, especially artisans who produced lovely wooden chests and chairs using the simplest of tools. He found himself astonished and mystified by Indian magic and told a long story about a magician who made a sapling suddenly appear in barren soil, then grow and bear fruit, and finally disappear under his cloak. Sapir ended the story with an admission of his ignorance before the wonders

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[13] *Even Sapir*, II: 85.

of God. He also wrote admiringly about the comfort of riding in palanquins, the durability of palm leaves for keeping records, ingenious ways by which Indians cool their houses, the "wisdom" of elephants, and ten beneficial uses of the coconut tree. He personally tested and recommended the pleasant taste and salutary effects of coconut juice, as well as distilled and fermented liquors made from various parts of coconut trees.

Religion, however, was a different matter. *Even Sapir* contains four passages on Hindu images and rituals, emphasizing the variety, abundance, and artistry of the images, but also expressing disapproval. Here is an excerpt from Sapir's first and longest description of Hindu worship, from a chapter on Bombay:

> Many of the inhabitants of the land are divided in their beliefs, doctrines, and opinions, in venerating their idols (*elilim*) and abominations (*to`evot*), of every host of the heavens, of every animal and beast of the earth, of the horn of the ox, of images and all works of delusion (*ta`tu`im*), variety upon different variety, as they were in ancient days. When I reflected on some of their worship and the days of their festivals, I comprehended several sayings, verses, and stories in the Bible and Talmud which I had not previously understood.
>
> In every house there is idolatry (*avodah zarah*), the image of a woman and two children, or male and female, naked and embracing,[14] fashioned in stone, wood, or metal, and positioned on the wall or on the table, and an eternal lamp (*ner tamid*) burning before them. And every morning, before any act or labor, before eating or drinking, they place in front of them a heave offering (*terumah*) from their food—this is the offering of idolatry (*tiqrovet avodah zarah*)—and then the rest is eaten and they go forth to their labor.[15]

Later, in an unnamed Tamil city, Sapir is amazed at the abundance, endless array, and craftsmanship of the religious images he sees there:

> In every street and market and at every corner and on roofs of the houses stand gods (*elilim*), diverse and strange (*shonim um'shunim*), graven images fashioned of wood and stone in wondrous forms, works of manual craftsmanship, and particularly on the roofs of the temples of their illusions (*batei ta`ato`eihem*), all of them covered with graven images (*pesilim*) and gods (*elilim*).[16]

These descriptions, because they express no overt opinion, have the appearance of a traveler's objective observations, but Sapir's choice of words, which come out of biblical and rabbinic denunciations of idolatry, carry the worldview in

[14]Cf. 1 Kings 7:36 and Rashi's exegesis.

[15]*Even Sapir*, II: 51.

[16]*Even Sapir*, II: 94.

which he was raised and convey his viewpoint. For Sapir, Hindu gods are *elilim*, *gilulim*, and *to'evot*, and Hindu images are *pesilim* and *ta`tu`im*—terms usually translated as false gods, idols, delusions, graven images, and abominations. They echo sentences from Leviticus, Deuteronomy, the Prophets, and Psalms which harshly condemn the veneration of foreign gods and statues. Consider, as just three examples, Isa. 41:7, "In that day you will reject the *elilim* of silver and the *elilim* of gold which your sinful hands have made"; Jeremiah 10:15, "They are vanity, the work of delusion (*ma`aseh ta`tu`im*)"; and Psalm 97:7, "All who worship *p'silim* are put to shame." An exegesis found in two rabbinic texts identifies these particular Hebrew terms (and more) as names of shame and reproach which Jews are commanded to use when speaking of foreign gods.[17] In addition, two of Sapir's terms for Hindu deities appear in a prayer he spoke daily, the *Aleinu*, which calls on God to remove and uproot *elilim* and *gilulim* from the earth. One term, *avodah zarah* (literally: strange worship), used by Sapir six times in describing Hindu worship, appears prominently in the Talmud and Midrash as a general term for idolatry, and one tractate of the Mishnah, entitled *Avodah Zarah*, is devoted to prohibitions against contact with idols, idolaters, and objects involved with idolatry.

Sapir also states his disapproval of Hindu worship explicitly in a sentence which he constructed from four biblical phrases:[18] he hopes that Hindus "will recognize and know that their fathers bequeathed them a lie[19] and that they erred from the path to make silent idols (*elilim 'ilmim*),[20] to burn incense and to sacrifice to nothingness and emptiness,[21] and to worship the work of their hands made of wood and stone."[22] Here Sapir associates the gods of Hinduism with biblical assertions of emptiness, error, and lies.

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[17] *Sifra Qedoshim*, Parasha 1. *Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, Mishpatim*, Tractate *Kaspa*, Parashah 20. *Mekhilta* merely lists the names, but *Sifra* finds derogatory meanings in them: "*Elilim* because they are hollow (*ẖalulim*), *pesel* because they are invalid (*nifsalim*) . . . *gilulim* because they are disgusting (*megu`lim*),"

[18] *Even Sapir*, II: 109.

[19] Cf. Jer. 16:19, our fathers have inherited a lie (following a sentence about detestable and abominable things).

[20] Hab. 2:18

[21] Cf Isa 41:12, they shall be as nothing and emptiness.

[22] Deut. 4:28, said to the Israelites: "and you shall serve gods, the work of the hands of man, wood and stone"; also Isa. 37:19.

Laws of Observation

Yet, according to the Hindus to whom I have shown Sapir's descriptions, he was a good (if imperfect) observer of Hindu images and actions; he paid attention, he was curious.

Such attention, however, might seem to transgress the biblical warning, "Do not turn to other gods" (Lev. 19.4), which had been interpreted in the Talmud as a prohibition against looking at idols,[23] and later by Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) and Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270) as a ban against even thinking about idolatry.[24] Maimonides applied Deut. 12.30, which forbids inquiring about how foreign nations worship their gods, even to Jews who do not intend to engage in the idolatry they study.[25] We know from Sapir's many references in *Even Sapir* to Nahmanides and to Maimonides' legal works that he was familiar with these writings. So it would be pertinent to ask how he may have justified his decision to observe Hindu images and describe for a Jewish audience what they looked like and how they were worshiped.

Since Sapir referred a number of times to three legal codes[26]—Joseph Karo's *Shulhan Arukh* (16th c.), which was in turn based on the *Arba`ah Turim* of Jacob b. Asher (14th c.) and on Karo's own work, the *Beit Yosef*—these works may provide clues to his reasoning. Thus, the general prohibition against observing idolatry applies, according to *Shulhan Arukh* 142.15, only "if one enjoys (or benefits from) its sight"—which Sapir could deny. Another law, based on the talmudic interpretation[27] of Deut. 18.9, permits keeping images if one's only purpose is to study them and "to understand and to teach" (141.4); and Sapir could read this exemption as a counterweight to the general ban against observing idols, so that he was permitted to study them in order to explain idolatry to his readers. Other laws (147.1, 150.4) prohibit mentioning the names of foreign deities and approaching closer than four cubits to a temple, but permit mentioning idolatry which specifically appears in the Torah (147.4). The *Beit Yosef* permits the disparaging of idolatry (147.5)

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[23]Shabbat 149a

[24]Nahmanides, Commentary to Lev. 19:4; Maimonides, MT Avodah Zarah, 2:2.

[25]Maimonides, MT Avodah Zarah, 2:2; *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Prohibition 10.

[26]For example, I:101b, II:47, II:56, II: 101.

[27]Found in t.AZ 18a and 43b, Shabbat 75a, RH 24b. See Rashi's interpretation of Deut. 18.9: "But you may learn [about idolatry or magic] to understand and teach, that is to say, to understand how corrupt are their works, and to teach your children not to do such and such, because that is a rite of the nations."

and the *Shulḥan Arukh* permits deriding idolaters and forbids praising them (147.5, 151.14). Sapir could see himself obeying these laws, although he does praise the artistry of the images and the skills and resourcefulness of Hindus in general. As to discussing idolatry which also appears in the Torah, we shall examine Sapir's thoughts on this subject.

But let us first consider the behavior of a Jew who traveled in India thirty years before Sapir. David d'Beth Hillel, a man of Lithuanian origins whose home was Safed, had described Hindu temples and images in even more detail than Sapir. Visiting six different temples during his arduous overland journey from Bombay to Madras, he carefully observed each building's appearance, first from the outside and then from within, noticing especially any statues or wall reliefs of animals and deities. He was often impressed with the craftsmanship, calling it "cunning work." If there was an inner sanctum, he would try to enter but was usually blocked by priests or locked doors. Having learned Hindustani, David would then "enquire" about the images or people's behavior. Priests or bystanders would eventually give in to his importuning and reply. In response, David would "begin to laugh very much" or "mock them," and be "very sorry to say" what he thought was the true meaning of a Hindu name or narrative. For example, he claimed that the name "Ram" really came from Hebrew, meaning "high" and referring to the one true God; that Brahma could not have created the world, being merely a man-made statue; and that the name "Brahma" itself derived from the Hebrew word for creation (*bara'*), which Hindus had "wronged" by misusing it.[28]

Sapir named no Hindu deities, entered no temples, never argued with Hindus. The differences in these two men's observations of Hinduism and interactions with Hindus reflect their particular personalities and views of their role as Jewish travelers, but their audiences may be another factor. Sapir was writing for Jews sensitive to *halakhah*, and David wrote in English for a British audience living in Madras, many of whom were interested in the conversion of Hindus to Christianity.[29]

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[28]David d'Beth Hillel, *Travels from Jerusalem through Arabia, Kurdistan, Part of Persia and India to Madras 1824–32* (Madras, 1832), pp. 148–49, 157–58, 207, and elsewhere.

[29]See especially the book's Preface, Dedication, "Advertisement," and List of Subscribers. David quotes Scripture often but seldom alludes to rabbinic literature, with which his audience would have been unfamiliar.

Ancient Identities

In one of Sapir's paragraphs about Hinduism quoted above, there appears an odd statement about Hindu images: "as they were in ancient days"; and then Sapir makes the surprising claim that his observations of Hindu practice enabled him to understand parts of the Bible and Talmud that had before eluded him. These assertions lead us to Sapir's theory of the history of Hinduism. He thought that Indian culture had not changed in thousands of years, so that in India he was seeing some of the same religious practices and cultural customs that had prevailed among ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, and Greeks, as also among ancient Israelites who had turned to the idolatry of the surrounding nations.

For example, at an unnamed city on the Tamil plains Sapir encountered a sacred chariot of huge proportions, with "great wooden wheels of the height of three men," decorated with "all kinds of images and statues."

> And on the days of their festivals all the people of the city gather together and lift them on their shoulders, because they are an exhausting burden[30] even for hundreds of men, and they move it about the city on every road, with a great tumultuous voice, songs, and dances.

Then Sapir adds in a footnote: "And this is what they meant about Manasseh who made an idol (*avodah zarah*) weighing as much as a thousand men, and likewise with the idol which Nebuchadnezzar set up." The scene which Sapir witnesses in southern India leads his mind to the Talmud, which tells of Manasseh, king of Israel, making "an image as heavy as a thousand men, and every day it slew all of them,"[31] perhaps meaning that its enormous weight crushed them.[32] Sapir thinks also of the third chapter of the Book of Daniel, in which the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar erects an enormous gold statue for the peoples of the world to worship.

The sacred cattle which Sapir sees on the road from Trivandrum remind him of two more forms of idolatry mentioned in the Talmud:

> The cattle . . . are very big and of great strength, and have a large fat back like a camel swaying back and forth . . . and there are some which the people of the land would venerate, exalting and honoring them and covering their horns with silver, and they do not do work with them because they are holy to them, and

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[30]Isa. 46:1, *masa' la'ayeifah*, referring to the heavy images of Babylonian gods.

[31]Sanh. 103b

[32]As suggested by Rashi in his commentary.

> they were idolatry [of the type] "*Shor afis,*" and the worshipers, the men and the women, would raise over their heads an image of a horn. (*Author's footnote:* and this is what they meant by "Write on the horn of an ox [*qeren ha-shor*] that they would have no place in the World to Come.").[33]

Sapir's use of the phrase "*shor afis*" is puzzling because no such term appears in rabbinic writings; I would guess, however, that he was referring to the undefined god in the Talmud called *sar afis*. He probably reasoned that the idolatry associated with this *sar afis* was veneration of a *shor*, an ox, and that he was seeing with his own eyes this very same veneration in India.[34] Likewise, the ritual of holding an ox horn over one's head led Sapir to think he could now understand another sentence in rabbinic literature. Midrash Leviticus Rabbah had asserted that Greece "persisted impudently with its edicts against Israel, and said to them: 'Write on the horn of the ox that you have no share in the World to Come.'"[35] Sapir thinks that the Indian ritual he sees in south India explains why the Greeks chose an ox horn rather than something else when they tried to force Jews to disavow their faith. It is because oxen were sacred to the Greeks just as they are sacred to the Hindus of his day.

These identifications all presume that the religion that Sapir sees in India is of a piece with the ancient forms of idolatry found among the biblical Israelites, Greeks, and Babylonians. Hinduism is just as ancient and of the same essence. Indeed, this claim allows Sapir to prove to the most conservative portion of his Jewish audience that he is not wasting their time or committing a sin in reporting Hindu worship and Indian customs. His Indian observations become instead an extension of the holy study of Torah by elucidating its obscurities through observations gained by travel.

Moses Maimonides had viewed Hinduism as a contemporary survival of the Sabian idolatry that had covered the world in ancient times; of "the Hindus," he wrote: "These are the remnants of the religious community of the Sabians, for this was a religious community that extended over the whole

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[33] II: 93–94.

[34] Two traditions about *sar afis* appear in Avodah Zarah 43a. *Sar afis* is usually translated today as Sarapis, but Sapir may not have made this connection. Hayyim Yosef Pollak, in his notes to the 1849 edition of *Sefer Aqeidat Yitzhak,* also uses the phrase *shor afis,* in this case identifying it with Egyptian veneration of oxen as the inspiration for the Israelites' construction of the golden calf. *Afis,* he writes, refers to emptiness and error. See *Sefer Aqeidat Yitzhak He`arot, Sha`ar* 53, Note 1.

[35] Mid. Lev. R. 13.5, Soncino translation. The versions in Midr. Gen. Rab., Tanhuma, and Yalkut Shimoni say that the Israelites were ordered to write on the horn of an ox that they had "no share in the God of Israel."

earth."[36] Likewise, Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089–1164) had used Arab reports about India to interpret ancient Israelite[37] and Egyptian customs[38] appearing in the Bible because he thought of India as a living remnant of an extensive ancient civilization comprising all the descendants of Ham.[39] Sapir follows a similar line of thought, and finds biblical and rabbinic significance in his observations of Indians moving sacred chariots around a city and lifting ox-horns over their heads in veneration of cattle.

Sapir applies the same theory to cultural practices. He believes he has gained insight into Jewish literature when he discovers Indians using iron styluses, not ink, to write letters and business accounts on palm leaves, and when he learns that people in Burma are commanded to bow down and bend the knee (*kir`u birkhu*) when the king passes in his chariot. From the Indian styluses he thinks he has clarified what a number of Jewish texts meant by various vague terms for writing instruments.[40] From the Burmese command to bow down, he realizes that "thus was the law of all kings in ancient days who took for themselves the glory of God, and especially Pharaoh," thereby explaining the same command in Gen. 41:43.[41]

Jewish Remnants

Yet, though Hinduism was essentially ancient and idolatrous, Sapir identified certain Jewish elements and similarities in it; Hindu and Jewish practices converged at certain points.

Writing about the Parsees of Bombay, whom he considered descendants of Jewish exiles who had "forgotten the God of their fathers," he notes vestiges of their Judaic past which they still maintained, such as "the *tzitzit* of Israel" and Hanukah and celebrating Purim by "beating and burning a Haman." He

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[36]*Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.29, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 515.

[37]Gen. 24:2 (Long Commentary).

[38]Gen. 46:34, Ex. 8:22 (Long Commentary).

[39]Ex. 8:22 and 19:9 (Long Commentary), Psalms 2:12. For further discussion of medieval Jewish views of Hinduism, see Richard G. Marks, "Hindus and Hinduism in Medieval Jewish Literature," in Nathan Katz, ed., *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: A View from the Margin* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[40]*Even Sapir*, II: 97. Sapir thinks he has clarified Isa. 8:1, m.Kelim 13.2, Mishneh Torah: Categories of Impurity 9.5, m.Avot 5.6, m.Gittin 2.3, and several more passages.

[41]*Even Sapir*, II: 115.

then adds this observation: "There are other nations in India who also observe Purim."[42]

Later, discovering many biblical names among the Ceylonese, Sapir proposes a theory to explain Jewish customs which he has "discovered" in India and Ceylon. He argues that "there is among them [Indians and Ceylonese] a trace from the seed of the House of Israel, the many who were exiled from long ago in this land and since then, since the time of the First Destruction" (of the First Temple). Sapir thinks Jews were already living in India in the time of the Persian empire,[43] and that more Jews immigrated after the destruction of the Second Temple, mainly to the area of Cochin. Additional Jewish families had immigrated periodically from Europe to Malabar to escape persecution.[44] By calculating the many offspring which this great number of Jews would have produced, Sapir arrives at an "immense" number of Jewish inhabitants in India's past. Nearly all of them, however, assimilated.

> They were scattered to all the winds and mixed with the nations of the lands and learned their ways until they were forgotten from [our] people, and there remain for a few of them only the names of their fathers which they held onto as a mark of memory, and even a few of the customs, as I related above.[45]

So one reason why Hindus observe a festival like Purim, burning an effigy of an evil character,[46] is that Jews assimilating to Hinduism had celebrated Purim, which then took on a Hindu form.

Sapir does not explicitly identify other examples of Jewish remnants, but he occasionally uses the vocabulary of Jewish ritual when describing certain Hindu practices. In his long passage about Hinduism in Bombay, we find three Hebrew terms for Jewish rituals which Sapir applies to Hindu rituals. Hindus keep "an eternal lamp (*ner tamid*) burning before" their deities, and every morning Hindus place before them "a heave offering (*terumah*) from their food"; and when they carry their *elilim* through the streets, they do so "with the

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[42]*Even Sapir*, II: 50–51.

[43]Based on a reading of Esther 1:1. Nachmanides wrote: "Moreover, 'from India to Cush' (Esth. 1:1, 8:9) is written. This is written about the commands of Mordecai to all the Jews who were in the kingdoms of King A<u>h</u>ashverush [8:9], the near and the far, that is, "from India to Cush" (*<u>H</u>idushei Ha-Ramban* [Nachmanides], Megillah 2a [fourth para.]).

[44]*Even Sapir*, II, Chap. 24.

[45]*Even Sapir*, II: 95.

[46]Perhaps the burning of effigies of Ravana at the end of the festival of Navaratri (or Dasehra), after the Ram Lila drama.

voice of a festive multitude," a phrase echoing Psalm 42:5. All three terms are related to the Temple in Jerusalem: the eternal lamp inside the Temple (and in later synagogues), food set aside for Temple priests, and festive crowds in Jerusalem walking to the Temple. The question, however, is whether Sapir used these terms with the explicit intent of demonstrating parallels between the two religions. Sometimes he seems to use biblical and rabbinic phrases consciously to add meaning to his sentences, and sometimes these ancient phrases seem to function as basic vocabulary or mere ornament.

"Holy to Them"

In addition to the category of idolatry, Sapir sometimes interprets Hinduism through the less traditional category of perceptual holiness. Speaking of the way that people near Trivandrum treat their cattle, he writes, "they do not do work with them because they are holy to them (*qedoshim heimah lahem*)." He uses the same phrase twice again in describing Hinduism, once to explain why Hindus place corpses in the Ganges River ("one sees bodies of the dead floating on the face of the river Ganges, because this is holy to them"[47]), and once more at the end of a paragraph about people who venerate their cows:

> This worship is holy to them (*qedoshah hi' lahem*)! And so most of the men of this kingdom, worshipping this god (*ha-elil hazeh*), walk to the market with their foreheads and chests exposed and anointed with the excrement of a cow. And no one shames them (*v'ein makhlim davar*), and they are even called holy (*ve`od qadosh yeiamer lahem*)![48]

Certainly in the last example, Sapir is expressing astonishment and scorn for men venerating cows in this way. "And no one shames them" (a phrase from Judges 18:7) appears again in Sapir's account of Indian women from villages near Cochin who come to the market "naked down to their middles, and they did not feel embarrassed, and no one shames them."[49] But another phrase in the quotation, "and they are called holy" (based on Isaiah 4:3, *qadosh yeiamer lo*, literally: "holy is said of him"), expresses no denigration elsewhere in *Even Sapir*, but simply the idea of a public recognition of holiness. For example, Sapir states that each synagogue in Cairo owns an ancient handwritten copy of the Torah which Jews "call holy" (*qadosh yeiamer lo*), more so than the synagogue's newer scroll.[50]

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[47] *Even Sapir*, II: 113.

[48] *Even Sapir*, II: 51.

[49] *Even Sapir*, II: 96.

[50] *Even Sapir*, I: 11b.

The phrase "holy to …" (*qadosh l-*), used by Sapir in describing Hindu views, is found in the Bible and Talmud; things, times, and words of Torah can be holy to God, to Aaron, to Israel. These things are inherently holy, although people do not always honor holy things as they should.[51] Sapir uses "holy" in this absolute sense when he speaks of the "holy Sabbath," "the holy City," "holy Israel," and "the holiness of the religion (*dat*) of Moses." But when Sapir writes about Hinduism and Islam, he is speaking of people's perspectives. They consider something holy, even if it is not holy in itself.

Writing about Muslims, he says of pilgrims on Hajj: "These travelers are called holy (*kadosh yeiamer lahem*)."[52] The city of Jedda "is also hallowed to them (*mequddeshet lahem*) because of the bones of a saint, Omar ibn al-Qatab, being in it."[53] He reports that Jews are not allowed to live in Tanta because the city is "holy in the eyes of the Muslims."[54] Regarding Indian Muslims, he writes of "their" holy sites: "In glad crowds they also keep the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina (in Arabia), their places of holiness."[55]

But Sapir also applies this language of imputed holiness to Jewish communities. He writes that the Jews of Cairo frequent a large tomb outside the city because "it is very holy to them" (*qadosh hu lahem m`od*). The man buried within this tomb, a judge named H̲ayyim Kafusi, had miraculously regained his sight in the presence of his entire congregation, and now Jews pour libations over his tomb and petition him for help.[56] The Jews of another Egyptian city have an ancient Torah scroll which is "very very precious and holy to them (*yaqar veqadosh lahem bim`od m`od*)" because many miracles have occurred through it, such as the healing of illnesses.[57] In Yemen, the deceased Mori Salim al-Shabazi "is great and holy and awesome to" the region's Jews because of the "signs and miracles" he once performed to save them from oppressive kings. The gravely ill pray at his tomb, and then enter a nearby cave; if they are

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[51]Num. 20:12 speaks of Aaron's failure to honor God as holy. In rabbinic literature, the Torah, its commandments, the Sabbath are holy. The Talmud speaks of degrees of holiness, and of things acquiring or losing holiness. Nevertheless, this holiness is not a matter of mere opinion or perspective.

[52]*Even Sapir*, I: 39b.

[53]*Even Sapir*, I: 41b.

[54]*Even Sapir*, I: 6a.

[55]*Even Sapir*, II: 112.

[56]*Even Sapir*, I: 10b.

[57]*Even Sapir*, I: 21b–22a.

deserving, they find a spring there flowing with water and an amulet written on a floating leaf.[58]

Moreover, the ritual customs considered holy by Jewish communities may actually consist mainly of impure accretions from foreign nations—as Sapir thought to be the case with the mourning customs of the Jewish community of Calcutta.

> They have many customs (*minhagim*) the foundation of which is in the mountains of Israel's holiness (*qodesh*),[59] but in the multitude of days their form was stripped and dressed in another form resembling the ways of the nations (*huqot ha-goyim*). Thus was added to the essence a number of accretions until the root was mixed with a large amount of vanities. The intelligent person will sift and select what is holy (*et ha-qadosh*) and draw it near to him.[60]

Thus, the religious customs of Calcutta Jews have an ancient holy essence but have become deformed by foreign influence; in fact, such customs may be mainly impure accretions, more worthless "vanity" than holiness. We then have the paradox of an inherently "holy Israel" engaging in less-than-holy customs. Sapir's distinction between original holiness and local customs would explain why he draws back from applying the word "holy" in an absolute sense to the tombs, Torah scrolls, and miracle-workers which Egyptian and Yemenite Jews considered holy.[61]

Sapir's approach to interpreting Hinduism seems characteristically rabbinic—in that he made use of two central categories of rabbinic thought: idolatry and holiness. The logic of Jewish practice and law led him to define Hinduism as "idolatry," in accordance with Jewish laws of *avodah zarah*. But he also employed the concept of holiness in a manner that allowed him to speak about human perspective. The result was to assert that Hindus practice idolatry but they do so thinking it is holy, in the same way that Muslims consider the town

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[58] *Even Sapir*, I: 82a.

[59] Cf. Ps. 87:1

[60] *Even Sapir*, II: 102.

[61] The technical term "holy man" (*'ish qadosh, ehad qadosh*) seems to be an exception, applying to a few Jews as well as Muslims of the past. Sapir may use it as a technical term for "saint." Moreover, there are some highly regarded Yemenite practices which Sapir never associates with the word "holy," most notably the practice of magic by respected rabbis—and briefly by an impoverished Sapir himself—through amulets and incantations using divine names. Instead Sapir bluntly declares such beliefs foolish and ultimately sinful. He further contrasts the "faith" in sacrificing to demons, held by a few Jews, with "our holy faith," thus implying stark opposition (*Even Sapir*, I: 59a).

of Tanta holy, and Egyptian and Yemenite Jews consider certain Torah scrolls or tombs holy, or Calcutta Jews consider their own Indian-influenced mourning-customs holy. Sapir thus employed a category of subjective holiness which enabled him to gain a certain degree of neutral distance in describing Hinduism, Islam, and ambiguous Jewish customs.

Brahmins and Britannia

There is another aspect to Sapir's view of Hinduism, related to priests and missionaries, which I can state here in brief but which requires another essay to explore adequately, because it echoes ideas found in European writings about India which need to be explored.[62]

Sapir believes that Hindus do not engage in "the sciences of speculation and research" because "they walk captive after the commands and edicts of their priests and judges, and from them they turn not."[63] He criticizes Hindu priests further:

> And every faction and faith has its priests (*komarim*) and temples of idolatry, to lead them captive, and they subjugate by means of them, through their festivals and celebrations, and as in former times were their path and actions, likewise even today do they hold sway over them with their impurity and rules.[64]

These priestly rules are so oppressive that they bring "toil and weariness of soul" to the lives of Hindus.

> With a faith in their vanities, they live lives of sorrow and toil and do not taste at all of the goodness in the life of this world. Meat and everything that comes out of living beings, for example, are not taken to their mouths all the days of their lives, and wine and liquor they do not drink, and they abstain from the human pleasures.[65]

Sapir is criticizing Hinduism for mind-numbing rules and life-denying asceticism, blaming these for the universal unhappiness of the Hindu populace.

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[62]I am thinking of, for example, statements about Brahmins by Voltaire and Diderot (discussed by Wilhelm Halbfast in Chap. 4 of *India and Europe* [SUNY, 1988]), and Coleridge; in Thomas Maurice's *The History of Hindostan* (1820); and in some missionary writings: Andrew Fuller's *Apology* (1808), John Chamberlain's *Memoirs* (1825), *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (1841), and John Russell's *Journal of a Tour* (1852), among several others. I hope to compare Sapir with English missionaries in a future study.

[63]*Even Sapir*, II: 52.

[64]*Even Sapir*, II: 109.

[65]*Even Sapir*, II: 109.

(This ascetic picture is contradicted by Sapir's reports of delicious coconut liquors and tasty roasted fish, the widespread use of spices, peppers, and betel nut quid, and the luxurious life of wealthy Indians.)

Elsewhere, he blames Indian suffering on food and weather rather than religion. Thus, "Most of the inhabitants of the land behave with extreme self-restraint, their food and drink is thin and meager, and many abstain from intoxicating drink and from all food that derives from living creatures." As a result of this diet, Indians look gaunt and feeble, and none are mighty warriors.[66] As to climate, Sapir claims that Indians are "docile of heart, down of spirit, limp of soul, and heavy of movement" because of "the nature of the air of this rich, warm, and moist land that stands on many waters, which weakens the strength, afflicts the spirit, and lessens the appetite for eating."[67]

Sapir offers a surprising solution to the problem of the soul-weariness caused by Hindu asceticism. He first notes that "the government of Britannia, may its glory be uplifted," has established many schools "to teach language and literature, science and knowledge," and has brought numerous Protestant missionaries who "try with all their might to bring the small with the great into the covenant of the Christian religion," but to little effect.[68] Then Sapir expresses a hope that "future generations [of Hindus] will be educated upon the blessings of the schools and these teachers, and they will study the customs and ways of Europe and will read and enjoy the books of Europe." He is astonished, however, that Hindus, with all they suffer from the oppressive rules of their own religion,

> do not become enlightened (*lo yaskilu*) and do not cast away their abominations and idols and their images, to grasp hold of another religion (*dat*) right in front of them, which teaches them knowledge and intelligence to walk in the paths of life and to find life.

In sum, Sapir contrasts Hindu ignorance and rejection of life with European knowledge and culture and Protestant "paths of life."

When mentioning Britannia, Sapir asks that "its glory be uplifted," and this sentiment recurs frequently in Volume 2 of his book. He calls the British government "happy" (*m'usheret*), "merciful," and "good." Writing about Aden, he portrays England as an agent of God, who "roused the mighty heart of the English government" to occupy and build up the territory, bringing freedom

[66] *Even Sapir*, II: 51 and 55.

[67] *Even Sapir*, II: 109.

[68] *Even Sapir*, II: 109.

and prosperity, benefits and mercies (*tovot v'ḇasadim*), to its Jews. Applying a phrase from the Passover liturgy about God redeeming the Israelites from Egypt, he says that England delivered the Jews "from darkness to great light."[69] In Bombay and Calcutta, "the merciful government of mighty England"[70] built up free commerce whereby people of all nations prosper, including Jews, through the "wisdom and freedom" planted in these cities.[71] Britain banned "evil customs" like placing corpses in the Ganges, and it abolished slavery. Sapir feels no fear during his idyllic cruise down the waterways of Kerala because "a fear of European men falls upon the rulers of the people of the land, who are subject to the British government."[72]

Sapir recounts the rebellion of 1858 at great length. He notes that the East India Company had attacked Indian kingdoms under false pretexts, and that Europeans had come to India for "pride and glory, and with grand honors." The cause of the rebellion was the understandable desire of Indians to throw off their subjugation to the Company. But then, according to Sapir, they, and especially Muslims, behaved like "beasts of the forest ripping apart their prey with anger and hot cruelty." The English government sent skilled soldiers to "avenge the innocent blood," until "the mighty hand and warrior's heart of the British" overcame the rebels. Sapir compares British soldiers to "a lion among the beasts of the forest." The Jews of Bombay and Calcutta, he adds, supported England in this war, praying for its success, because they depended upon the British; and the Jews called "Bene Israel" fought valiantly on Britain's side.[73]

It seems, then, that Sapir's high opinion of Britain is based on his identification with Jews who benefited from British power, both in Aden and India. But why does he recommend that Hindus convert to Anglican Christianity and assimilate European values through British schools? What does modern Europe mean to Sapir, who is impressed with English engineering feats and the organization of European cities? Why does Sapir's criticism of Hindu "priests" sound like that of other European writers? Did Sapir's later travels in Europe in 1865 influence him as he wrote or edited the second volume of *Even Sapir* (published in 1874),[74] the volume which narrates his travels in Aden and India? These and related questions deserve further investigation.

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[69] *Even Sapir*, II: 4–5, 31.

[70] *Even Sapir*, II: 35.

[71] *Even Sapir*, II: 97 and 35.

[72] *Even Sapir*, II: 93.

[73] *Even Sapir*, II: 109–111.

[74] According to Rivlin, "R. Ya`aqov Sapir," p. 393.

Another Interpretation

In a general geography of the world titled *Shevilei `Olam* (first volume published in 1827), Samson Bloch (1784–1845) also employed the concept of subjective holiness in portraying Hinduism, but otherwise his approach was very different from Sapir's, and a brief comparison will offer some perspective on Sapir's interpretation of Hinduism.

Bloch, an influential writer of the Haskalah movement, never traveled beyond Europe, and took his picture of India from German, English, and classical writings. In the introduction to his long section on India, Bloch declares that Nature has emptied the cup of her beauty and splendor into India, making it a "garden of Edens [sic] in the world," and that "the people who dwell there are good of heart and men of kindness."[75] He then systematically discusses India's climate, rivers, produce, peoples, religion and philosophy, foods, languages, and government. He portrays Hinduism as a rational system of philosophy and ethics encumbered by harmful ecclesiastical superstitions. Bloch tells his readers that Manu's ethical teachings in the first three Vedas are identical with Hillel's talmudic dictum, "This is all the Torah as a whole, and the rest is its commentary."[76] He explains that Hindu belief is founded on a single primordial reality called Para Brahman which is too transcendent to be worshipped and, like the biblical God of 1 Kings 8:27, cannot be localized in a temple; it endorses justice and uprightness over burnt offerings.[77] However, for the sake of the masses, this ineffable reality is visualized as three *elilim*, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, each of whom is assigned a wife with her own powers.

Bloch uses the term *elil* in a non-judgmental way, and invents a new word, *elilah*, for "goddess."[78] He also uses the phrase "holy to" as a report of Hindu perception, although it is "the holy" which, in Bloch's view, causes human suf-

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[75]*Shevilei `Olam kolel tekunot kol arzot tevel* . . . (Zolkiew: Meyerhoffer, 1822), pp. 63b, 64a.

[76]Shabbat 31a, referring to Hillel's instruction to a non-Jew: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is all the Torah as a whole, and the rest is its commentary; now go and learn it."

[77]A major theme of the literary prophets. See Ps. 98:9, Prov. 1:3, Jer. 7:22 and 17:26 for phrases on which this sentence is built.

[78]Eliezer ben Yehudah, in his influential dictionary begun in 1881, offers only Bloch, writing about India, Greece, and China, as the source of a new meaning of *elil*, namely, "an expression for gods of those who believe in many gods" (*Milon HaLashon Ha`Ivrit* [London, H. Greval and Co., n.d.], Vol. 1, p. 242).

fering. Brahmins are the priests,[79] sages, and holders of instruction (*tofsei torah*), who are holy (*qedoshim*) and a kingdom of priests (a phrase taken from Ex. 19:6) "to them."[80] Brahmin beliefs, however, have ruled over India since ancient times and weigh very heavily on the people, and Brahmins use omens and false miracles to frighten their followers into bringing sacrifices and gifts to the temple. They also make Hindus believe in vanities such as demons and angels and in spells to win the hearts of women. Brahmins teach "nonsensical things which contradict the logic of the mind and the laws of nature."[81]

Bloch, like other thinkers of the European Enlightenment, embraces universal (that is, European) rationality and individual freedom while disparaging priestly authority, ritual, magic, and mythic worldviews. His categories are conceptual and ethical and sometimes phenomenological. We notice, in contrast, Sapir's more traditional use of the rabbinic categories of behavior (idolatry) and falsehood, although we also see him taking into account people's perceptions of holiness. When Sapir criticizes Hindu priests, moreover, he does not focus on their false beliefs, but rather on their harsh dietary laws and "their impurity"—which are, again, traditional rabbinic categories. Sapir had read parts of *Shevilei `Olam* but viewed the world much differently.[82]

Hinduism in Torah and Travel

What, then, was the place of Hinduism in the structure of Sapir's thought, those contrasting realms of Torah and travel which I identified at the beginning of this essay?

One extreme appears in a letter which Sapir wrote home near the end of his travels in India. "My heart," he exclaims, "laments and yearns for my brothers and my people, the dear children of Zion with whom the Torah and reverence and wisdom ride together as one." He cannot find in all of India a rabbi, teacher, or companion with whom to "enjoy matters of religion and wisdom." He calls India an *'even ha-to`im* in reference to a rock in ancient Jerusalem where people claimed lost property, but which here suggests the location of

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[79]Bloch calls Brahmins *kohanim*, the term for Jewish priests, rather than *komarim*, the term for specifically foreign priests used by Benjamin of Tudela and Sapir when writing about India.

[80]Bloch, *Shevilei `Olam*, p. 69b.

[81]Bloch, *Shevilei `Olam*, pp. 72b–73a.

[82]I:28a, where Sapir praises Bloch as "the great Torah sage and scientific researcher."

a lost and wandering Sapir himself.[83] He tells his children that he yearns to return home to them but that God ("may His great name be blessed!") has turned aside the wheels of his cart and blocked his way, but he prays that God will restore his "captivity."[84] In this letter, travel in India represents the opposite of Torah and home, and India is a place only of emptiness, exile, unending paths, and yearning for home.

But also, in a sense, Sapir brought Torah with him, or discovered it on his road. When Sapir floated for five days through the waterways of Kerala, he noticed the physical characteristics of the foreign scenery: Banyan trees with their aerial roots, huts covered with coconut leaves, salty water, human and animal sounds, the lay of the land—but he also words his experience of this scenery with phrases taken from Jewish books: "like the Garden of Eden," "fruitful and full of branches" (Ezek. 19:10), "repose and delight" (*nahat v`oneg*, language of the Sabbath[85]), "every good fragrance" (*rei-ah tov*, a phrase with many positive literary associations[86]), and "like a garden of the Lord (Gen 13:10, Isa 51:3). Moreover, as Sapir traveled from place to place in India, he measured his days by the Jewish calendar, from Torah-reading to Torah-reading and Sabbath to Sabbath; for example, he arrived in Tuticorin "on the day before the Sabbath of *Parshat Matot*, in the morning."[87]

And as we have seen, Sapir brought biblical and rabbinic words, carrying familiar categories and judgments, into his descriptions of Hindu religious life: Hinduism was *avodah zarah*, and Hindu gods were *elilim* and *gilulim*. To Sapir, Hindu religious images looked like the Babylonian and Greek idolatry he remembered from Jewish books. Some Hindu rituals looked like Jewish practices and could be described with the language of Jewish ritual, such as "eternal light" and "heave offering." Likewise, elements of Indian culture stood out for their relationship to Torah; Indian styluses, for example, bore identity with writing instruments mentioned by rabbinic books. In all these ways, Sa-

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[83]Or perhaps to Indians who stray in error (*to`im*). The phrase appears in b.Taan. 19a and b.BM 28b.

[84]*Even Sapir*, II: 107.

[85]*Menuhah*, a form of *nahat*, appears many times in the Shabbat liturgy and songs, as does also the word *`oneg*.

[86]*Rei-ah tov*, "a good fragrance," is the occasion for a blessing in the prayer book, and is associated in rabbinic literature and Rashi with the fragrance of the field in Gen. 27:27, and with spices (*b'samim*), apples and etrog, the Garden of Eden, and the Song of Songs

[87]*Parshat Matot* refers to the section of the Torah which will be read by Jews on that particular Sabbath.

pir viewed India through the constructs of home and all the Jewish writings in his head. Sapir looked for, discovered, and devised identifications and links with, extensions of, what he had already learned and "known."

But he occasionally moved beyond this "pre-knowledge." His use of the notion of perceptual holiness to define Hindu religious experience opened a traditional Jewish concept to the non-traditional interpretations and novel experiences of foreign people (including Muslims and non-European Jews). A central term from the world of Torah thus took on content beyond that world.

In addition, he intended to bring to the attention of his Jewish audience what was foreign to them, different, distinct, "new or strange," the exotic,[88] and yet inherently of interest. And he intended to report what he considered empirical truth, repeatedly using the words "I saw"—as in the following sentences:

> "I saw them [carpenters] doing their work without tools of their craft," "In the courtyard where I lived, I saw one of its residents, a Hindu, who had a very fat cow whom he worshipped," "I saw him [the Raja of Trivandrum] on that day as he passed through the market," "I saw and put my mind to all the ways of David [Sasoon], . . . and the ways of all the residents of the city, their behavior, customs, and way of life."

Further, although Sapir already "knew" Hinduism as *avodah zarah* in general, he observed its exact physical forms and the specific actions of its adherents, with curiosity and open eyes, in a way that required time and attention. He noticed specific attributes which he could not have learned at home or predicted, and which he decided to observe carefully enough to report with some accuracy. For example, this is what he wrote about a Hindu festival in Bombay, perhaps Ganesh Chaturthi:

> In the days of their festivals they make large figures like these, and dress them in garments of honor and riches. They decorate them with costly ornaments made of silver and gold and every precious stone, and in a great crowd they carry them on poles in the streets of the city, with the voice of a festive multitude,[89] with every musical instrument, and with songs and hymns, until they come to the seashore and there they remove the mantles and ornaments from the figures and throw them naked to the sea.

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[88]Sapir's phrase "new or strange" (perhaps comparable to the English word "exotic"), which defined his criteria for writing about non-Jewish subjects, and his outsider's curiosity, suggest fruitful ways of comparing Sapir with European writers such as those discussed by Mary Campbell in *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600*, Justin Stagl in *A History of Curiosity: The Theory of Travel, 1550–1800*, and Nigel Leask in *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770–1840*.

[89]Echoing Ps. 42:5.

Though Sapir's overriding category of interpretation was *avodah zarah*, and though one phrase may suggest ancient Israelite celebration, all the details come from observation, freshly worded for this report.

Yet, from a viewpoint exterior to Sapir's, his travel experiences and reporting might seem significantly limited. He moved around India as an outsider, protected by British power. He observed and judged with a certain remoteness, never learning the local language or listening to the Indians he described. He was impressed with Indian foods, vegetation, and animals rather than cultural values. The Indian culture which attracted him was a matter of technique, like cooling houses, riding in palanquins, and sleeping in mosquito nets, rather than ideas and attitudes.

So this rabbi from Jerusalem who traveled to India brought along categories, vocabulary, laws of observation, a calendar, expectations, and judgments from home, especially in his encounter with Hinduism, and he never sought to break through his own position as a foreign outsider, but he was sometimes moved by an outsider's open-eyed curiosity, the willingness to imagine the way non-Jews experienced holiness, and the urge to report foreign scenes and religions to people at home.