

## Matan – Judaism and Hinduism

Alan Brill - "The most important thing I learned is not to trust any of the generalizations, stereotypes, or almost anything written in American popular literature," Brill said. "Even the most basic things that come on a Google search are incorrect."

### The Sheitel Controversy

#### שולחן ערוך יורה דעה הלכות עבודת כוכבים סימן קלט סעיף ב

עבודת כוכבים של ישראל אין לה בטול, אבל של עובד כוכבים ותשמישיה ונוייה, יש להם ביטול. ותקרותה, אין לה ביטול.

#### ט"ז יורה דעה סימן קלט ס"ק ד

(ד) ותקרותה אין לה ביטול. - דכתיב זבחי מתים מה מת אין לו ביטול לעולם אף עבודת כוכבים כן ונרא' לי הטעם דתקרות גרע (מאליל) [דאליל] עצמו ונויו תלוין בשלימותו דכל זמן שהוא שלם הוא פלח ליה וכן מחזיק אותה לנוי אבל אם נפסל בטל ממנו מחשבה זו מה שאין כן בתקרות דאפילו דבר מועט שאינו חשוב מקריב לפניו נמצא דלא פקע איסור אם נפסל:

#### תלמוד בבלי, עבודה זרה נא

מתני' מצא בראשו מעות כסות או כלים הרי אלו מותרין פרכילי ענבים ועטרות של שבלים וינות ושמינים וסלתות וכל דבר שכיוצא בו קרב ע"ג המזבח אסור :

אמר ר"נ אמר רבה בר אבוה אמר רב עבודת כוכבים שעובדין אותה במקל שבר מקל בפניה חייב ונאסרת זרק מקל לפניה חייב ואינה נאסרת א"ל רבא לר"נ מאי שנא שבר דהויא ליה כעין זביחה זרק נמי הויא ליה כעין זריקה א"ל בעינן זריקה משתברת וליכא

**MISHNA:** If one found money, a garment, or vessels at the head of Mercury, these are permitted. If one found vine branches laden with clusters of grapes, or wreaths made of stalks, or containers of wine, oil, or flour, or any other item the likes of which is sacrificed on the altar there, it is prohibited.

§ Rav Nahman says that Rabba bar Avuh says that Rav says: In the case of an object of idol worship that is worshipped by means of a stick, if one broke a stick before it, he is liable and the stick is rendered prohibited. If he threw a stick before it, he is liable, as its typical manner of worship involves a stick, but the stick is not rendered prohibited.

Rava said to Rav Nahman: What is different about the case where one broke a stick? In this case the stick is rendered forbidden as it is similar to slaughtering an offering, which is a rite performed in the Temple; so too, in the case where one threw a stick, it is similar to the sprinkling of the blood on the altar. Rav Nahman said to Rava: In order for a sacrificial rite to be similar to the sprinkling of blood, we require a form of throwing that scatters the offering, and that is not the case here.

#### שולחן ערוך יורה דעה הלכות עבודת כוכבים סימן קלט סעיף ג

איזהו נוי ואיזהו תקרות, נוי כגון שמדליק לפניה נרות או שטח לפניה בגדים וכלים נאים לנוי. ותקרות, כל שכיוצא בו קרב על גבי מזבח, כמו כל מיני מאכל, כגון בשר, שמינים וסלתות, מים ומלח, אם הניחו לפניה לשם תקרות, נאסר מיד. אבל דבר שאין מקריבין ממנו בפנים, אינו נאסר אלא א"כ עשה ממנו כעין זביחה או כעין זריקה המשתברת, והוא דרך לעבדה באותו דבר, אף על פי שאין דרך לעבדה בזה הענין. כיצד, עבודת כוכבים שעובדים אותה שמקשקים לפניה במקל ושיבר מקל לפניה, נאסר, מפני ששבירת המקל דומה לזביחה. אבל אם אין עובדים אותה במקל כלל, ושיבר מקל לפניה, אינו חייב ולא נאסר. ואם עבדה בקשקוש מקלו, והוא דרך עבודתה חייב ולא נאסר. וכן בכל דבר שעבדה כדרך עבודתה, בין אם הוא דרך כבוד או דרך בזיון, ואינו כעין פנים, חייב ולא נאסר. אבל אם לא עבדה במקל כדרך עבודתה, אלא זרקו לפניה, אינו חייב ולא נאסר.

#### ש"ד על שולחן ערוך יורה דעה הלכות עבודת כוכבים סימן קלט סעיף ג

ג ותקרות כו' - וכב"י דלהרמב"ם אם נמצא במקום עבודתה הכל אסור אפילו אינו קרב על המזבח א"כ הני נרות נמי אם הכניסום במקום עבודתם תקרות נינהו ולית להו ביטול ע"כ ודבריו נכונים וכל בעל נפש יש לו להחמיר

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Interestingly, after the death of Abraham's wife Sarah, the Torah says that Abraham took a wife named Keturah. They had children together, and the Torah says: "Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. But to the concubine children, Abraham gave gifts. Then he sent them away... to the land of the East." (Genesis 25:1-5) The words, "Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac," indicate the Isaac alone was the spiritual inheritor of Abraham's legacy – which was the ability to continue the Jewish faith. The other children, however, did not go

to the East empty-handed. According to the Zohar, the "gifts" refers to many of the mystical traditions of Abraham. Hence, the ancient eastern religions have their roots with Abraham.

### How Not to Make Halakhic Rulings \*

Daniel Sperber

In a series of articles and publications I discussed the question of how halakhic decisors (poskim) should act in our day and age, arguing that they should seek to bring people closer to a love of Judaism and halakha, to be inclusive rather than exclusive, and to practice what I called "friendly decision making" (pesikah yedidutit).... Thus, one must always take into account the implications of one's ruling, how much pain and anguish it may cause, weigh the relevant aspects involved in the issue, and seek out a way to find a suitable solution which will bring spiritual satisfaction to the questioners. Of course, we will not always be able to satisfy our "clients" with a "happy reply." But at least we should always try our hardest to do so.

#### 2. The Sheitel Memorandum

Some few years ago a new issue erupted primarily in the hareidi community: Women were wearing sheitels (wigs) made from human hair coming from India. Some, perhaps even much, of this hair came from a place called Tirupati, in South India, where there is a Hindu temple. Pilgrims coming to this temple, before entering it, shave their hair and place it outside the temple entrance. . Millions of Hindus come annually to Tirupati - perhaps as many as twenty thousand a day! -, and vast amounts of hair pile up. The temple authorities, apparently realizing that this hair could constitute an additional source of income, began, many years ago, to sell it to wig-making companies.

When this suddenly became known to a number of Rabbis in England, Israel and the U.S.A. - it had already been known to others and halakhically discussed many years earlier - they declared it "tikrovot avodah zarah", idolatrous offering, something directly related to idolatrous practice, and hence "assur be-hana'ah", such that it was absolutely forbidden to derive any benefit therefrom. The resultant publicity of this ruling led to mass burnings of those very expensive sheitels by the thousands.

Those devout women, who upon hearing that their sheitels were "idolatrous" immediately burned them, are to be lauded and applauded for their great piety. However, I imagine they were plagued with pangs of anguish, not only because they had to destroy what for them was a very costly and personal part of their apparel, but even more in that for many years they had been covering their heads with "idolatrous wigs", trespassing - albeit unwittingly - one of the most serious prohibitions in Jewish law.

Numerous erudite responsa were written discussing all sorts of halakhic aspects of this subject, the vast majority of them concluding that the sheitels were to be destroyed. Some more lenient ones counseled that they be exchanged - not necessarily such a practical suggestion. Only the barest minimum ruled that it was permitted to go on wearing them.

**Virtually none of those learned sages had any real knowledge of India, Indian religion or languages, and I suspect that the majority had never even been in India, and certainly not in Tirupati. It is true that a small mission was sent for a few days to examine the temple, but none of the members had the competence, the linguistic abilities etc., as they themselves admitted, to make a real evaluation of the pilgrims' hair-shaving activities. More surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, none of the experts in the field of Indian studies were consulted, neither, for example, Prof. David Schulman of the Hebrew University, an internationally acclaimed Indologist, nor Rabbi Alan Unterman of Manchester University, who did his doctorate in India on Indian religion, nor Prof. P.V. Wiswanath, a devout Jew of South Indian origin, now living in New Jersey, nor even the local Indian rabbis and authorities living in Mumbai and Delhi.**

One of the few rabbinic authorities to examine the issue systematically from all points of view, was the renowned posek R. Menashe Klein (ha-Katan), whose numerous volumes of responsa are very widely acclaimed and largely accepted also by the hareidi communities. Incidentally, he surmises that around a million women wear such sheitels, whose cost is upward of a thousand dollars each so that the total destruction of the wigs may amount to as much as a billion dollars (!) - hefsed merubeh, enormous monetary loss, an important

consideration to be taken into account by halakhist. And even if his assessment be seen as somewhat exaggerated, the halakhic point he made is certainly pertinent. His conclusion was that the sheitels were not prohibited, but he counselled against wearing them for other reasons.

Now without even making an unequivocal statement as to whether the Tirupati hair constitutes "tikrovet avodah zara" or not, my point is that the halakhic procedure whereby the rulings were concluded, was highly flawed and therefore totally unsatisfactory. The decisor (posek) bears a great burden of responsibility before making a ruling that may incur the loss of thousands of dollars to thousands of individual women, and perhaps cause them deep anguish on learning that they had been trespassing so serious a prohibition.

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On the fifth and sixth of February this year, I participated in the first "Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit" at Delhi, India. This summit was attended by a delegation of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and some prominent European rabbis, and religious leaders of the Hindu Dharma. I was asked to participate, perhaps because I had served briefly as a rabbi in India many years ago, and was therefore thought to have some understanding of Indian culture and religion.

Many leading Achariahs and Swamis from all over India were present, and a very lively and probing dialogue took place. In our discussions we asked them whether Hinduism is a polytheistic and idolatrous religion, and they all unanimously and most vigorously denied such an assertion, explaining the apparent outward manifestations of idolatry in a completely different fashion.

At the end of the conference, a "Declaration of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation" was co-signed by all participants. Perhaps the most significant clause in the whole document in this context is the opening one:

The participants affirmed that:

1) Their respective traditions teach Faith in One Supreme Being who is the Ultimate Reality, who has created this world in its blessed divinity and who has communicated Divine ways of action for humanity for different peoples in different times and places.

I wonder whether the learned rabbis who prohibited the use of Tiraputi-based sheitels would have ruled differently had they had this document before them. Perhaps not. Perhaps the way in which Indian religious authorities understand their own religion is irrelevant to them. They know better, even if it causes the loss of millions of dollars and many heartbreaks....

### Rav Yitzchak Halevi Herzog, Chief Rabbi of Israel

אינני יודע אם השאלה של רישיון לגויים בלתי נוצרים ובלתי מוסלמים לבוא להתיישב בארץ, לפי מידת חוקי ההגירה בלבד, תעלה על הפרק בעתיד הקרוב. הגויים התרבותיים שאפשר לחשוב עליהם בקשר עם זה, הם היהודים, הסינים והיפנים, ובנוגע להם עדיין איננו ברור לי שאפילו אלה אינם עובדים בשיתוף, כי לא למדתי כראוי את דתותיהם ודרכי הפולחן שלהם. אבל אפילו אם יש להם דין של עובדי עבודה זרה ממש, מכל מקום אם גם הם יוכלו בשטח הדרישה לדמוקרטיה במדינה היהודית מצד האומות המאוחדות, חושבני שלא יהא קושי שאי אפשר להתגבר עליו מצד חוק תורתנו הקדושה בנסיבות ובמצב הנוכחי של עם ישראל, ובלבד שלא יורשו לעשות מעשי תועבה ואכזריות במידה שיעליבו את רגשי המוסר הכלליים, וכגון התועבה של עמי הודו בנימוס של דתם שהאלמנה עולה על המוקד אחרי מות בעלה, וכדומה. ודאי שכל תועבה שהמטור הבריטי אוסר על היהודים בארצם הם, אנו נאסור על היהודים והדומים להם מהסינים והיפנים בארץ קודשנו אנו, ומי שלא יציית ענוש וענוש וגרוש יגרש כלה מן הארץ.

I conclude this section by sharing the testimony of an Israeli writer speaking of the impressions of her first visit to India. Rivka Miriam is observant and active in Torah study and various literary and religious forums. Her knowledge of Torah allows her to relate to her experience in India in terms taken from classical Jewish texts. Her testimony confirms the suggestion I have just made and points to what might be the source of India and Hinduism's appeal for Israelis and Jews:

And now to divinity. Meeting its expressions in India brought about a transformation in me. We Jews employ the common expression 'there is no place that is devoid of Him'. In India I discovered a world where indeed so it is. I discovered a world in which there is no one who does not believe. I discovered a world where one sees divinity in every tree and in every stone. But also in every deed and in every matter. The entire world is full of his glory.

Seeing divinity in India brought about a transformation in me. Indeed, there I saw a place full of faith. Another, different, way to believe, a path that may have been uprooted from us when, as the Talmud tells, the evil inclination for idol worship was uprooted. And perhaps together with that uprooting a part of faith as such was also uprooted.<sup>13</sup>

Judaism.<sup>10</sup> In some sense such a model and the turn to Indian spirituality generally may be taken as a sign of crisis. Of course, crisis contains opportunity and holds within it the promise of growth. While this type of spiritual encounter may be driven by the desire for growth, this desire is nevertheless fed by crisis in Jewish spiritual reality. Talk of 'spirituality' veils what can be considered the greatest aspect of Jewish spiritual crisis: that most of Judaism is unable to talk of God or to provide a conscious relationship with him. Different people would see Judaism's present crisis differently. While some see it in terms of identity and others in terms of continuity, still others conceive of it in terms of either learning or practice. In the present context, I would like to argue that Judaism's deepest crisis concerns God. Judaism is a religion that centres around God, but that to a large extent has lost touch with the living God.<sup>11</sup> God has not lost touch with Judaism, nor have the people of Israel lost their faith in God. But Judaism has lost, to a significant extent, the awareness of God at its centre and the ability to structure the entire life of the religious community, let alone the people of Israel, around access to divine presence and its grounding in the community's life. This loss has deep historical roots, and may itself be an expression of the destruction of the Temple, the loss of prophecy, and a long history of exile. This loss is, to my mind, included in what kabbalists speak of when they refer to the exile of the Shekhinah.

Jews are both a faithful people and a people of faith. But their religious life is presently constructed so that other religious values occupy places of primary importance, often eclipsing God's centrality within the religious system. One commonly attributes to Zoharic literature the maxim that the Torah, Israel, and God are one.<sup>12</sup> In one way this could express the unity of all values within

~~this is pre-~~  
The exile of God, his hiding, the difficulty in finding or accessing him—  
~~however we conceptualize it—~~ seems to me to be the heart of the Jewish spir-  
itual crisis. And it is only when we are able to confront the fact that we are in  
crisis that we may consider what the turn to Indian spirituality seeks to heal. It  
is not only that Jews find a spirituality in India that addresses a deep hunger in  
their souls; rather, India makes available a directness of approach to God that  
is often lacking in Judaism. This direct approach to God may be the hallmark  
of India's spiritual life and why it is so attractive to Jews.

When Jews conceive of the goals of the religious life, few of us think of com-  
munion or relationship with God, let alone consider it the only thing worth  
desiring. We seek happiness, family life, the well-being of our group, a life of  
values, learning, and overall flourishing. God plays a meaningful part in this  
package of ideals, but for very few is God actually the central focus of their  
quest. Here India provides so many opportunities for an alternative testimony  
that it has come to represent for many that very alternative. Indeed, the goal  
of the spiritual life as stated by so many spiritual teachers of the Hindu tradi-  
tion says it all: 'God realization'. Perhaps not all know what God realization  
means. Perhaps very few attain it. But it is a central governing ideal that  
informs the lives of thousands, if not millions, of spiritual seekers. Hinduism,  
as encountered through various teachers and religious groups, presents God  
at the centre and a systematic path to reach knowledge and awareness of God.

One of the most common practices of Hindus of different traditions is *japa*,  
the repetition of God's name. The quest to keep God's name a constant reality  
keeps God very much at the centre of one's awareness. Even more significantly,  
the theological structure of Hinduism makes God more readily available than  
do the Abrahamic faiths. Fundamental to the Hindu approach is the recogni-  
tion that God is omnipresent and all-pervading. This view allows one to rec-  
ognize God in all and to find him everywhere. Most forms of Judaism think of  
God in transcendent terms, even if they employ a religious language that  
speaks of God in personal terms. Even those Jewish traditions that portray  
God in pantheistic or panentheistic terms do not turn that insight into the  
governing approach to divinity, readily available for worship and contact.  
Thinking of God in terms of his omnipresence, as all-pervading in all forms of  
life, orients religious thought and practice in such a way that highlights God's  
accessibility. In terms of spirituality, this more than any other may be the one  
element that defines Hindu spirituality compared with Jewish spirituality. I  
contend that the centrality of God and God realization is what draws Jewish

The challenge of distinguishing between the visible form of worship and the theological superstructure can only be articulated on the basis of a more thorough knowledge of a religion. One must be aware of the deep Jewish antagonism to *avodah zarab* and of how easily this resorts to the power of the visual as a first step in applying a more critical methodology to the Jewish study of Hinduism. The exclusive appeal to worship while ignoring philosophical understandings of the religion is the root problem. It points to a weakness in the classical Jewish approach and reminds us of how difficult it is to achieve a balanced understanding of Hindu religious life. Even if we concede there is value in sending a rabbinic emissary, who should he have spoken to? The priests who receive gifts for the deity?<sup>25</sup> The heads of various spiritual schools and dynasties who honour the site and frequent it on regular pilgrimages? If the latter, the meaning of Hinduism might be found outside the temple, among a narrow section of its users. One further relevant possibility is that the temple at Tirupati was dedicated, actually rededicated, by one of India's greatest philosophers, Ramanuja in the eleventh century, who is said to have consecrated the temple and established its ritual practices. In a situation in which the meaning of an action is unclear, it would make sense to turn to the institution's founder and learn his intentions. Ramanuja was a proponent of a school of Vedanta called modified non-dualism. At stake in the differences between the different

## Who Speaks for Hinduism

for the religion?' Who holds the key to the proper interpretation of Hinduism, and whose voice should we take into account as we seek to understand Hinduism in relation to the Jewish concern with *avodah zarab*? This is a fundamental question of any Jewish theology of other religions, one completely ignored by the leap from the use of images in worship to the declaration of another religion as *avodah zarab*. If we reflect upon the relationship between ritual and philosophy, then we might consider the philosophers, the teachers of religion, as those who hold the key to the meaning and correct interpretation of the religion. The other extreme would be to consider the 'man in the temple', the common person who worships or on whose behalf worship is performed, as the authoritative voice inasmuch as he or she holds the key to the intention and hence to the theological understanding that drives a particular action. A median position might be the local authority, perhaps the local temple priest, who would offer the appropriate explanation of the ritual performed and the correct understanding of the deity worshipped. Finally, perhaps the meaning of the religion is best found in the writings of great figures of the past, regardless of contemporary understanding?

## Rav Adin Steinsaltz, Peace without Conciliation, The Irrelevance of Tolerance in Judaism

What about Indic religions and various kinds of Buddhism? Again, I do not believe that a definitive solution is possible, but a partial solution may be considered. It is important to introduce a distinction between theology and religious practice. In the ancient religions grouped under the name of Hinduism, there are many gods and local shrines, but the theological principles that guide belief and provide a uniformity of moral standards assume that all the deities revered in India or elsewhere are forms of, expressions of, or names for, one ultimate reality or God. Saivites propose Siva as the best name (among many names) for this ultimacy; Vaisnavites prefer Visnu or Krishna; *atman* is an Upanisadic word for the same principle—and *brahman* is perhaps the most common way among non-Muslim, non-Christian Indians of naming ultimacy...<sup>37</sup>

By the standards of Jewish law as applied to Jews, Hinduism (and Buddhism) do not count as monotheistic traditions. However, the essential point of the Noahide laws is that the standards of Jewish law do not apply to non-Jews. Radically pure monotheism is expected by Judaism only from Jews. The Noahide laws do not preclude gentile religions from developing softer, more complex, and compromised forms of monotheism. Under the Noahide laws, it is possible to assume that Hinduism and Buddhism are sufficiently monotheistic in principle for moral Hindus

and Buddhists to enter the gentile's gate into heaven. Jewish law regards the compromises made or tolerated by the world's major religions as ways of rendering essentially monotheistic theologies easier in practice for large populations of adherents. The fierceness of Islamic opposition to such compromises has no counterpart in Judaism. In Islam, it is seriously blasphemous for anyone of whatever faith to combine belief in the one God with popular ideas about other heavenly powers or with subtle theological doctrines such as the Trinity. Islam cannot tolerate such compromises because the truth that they violate is applicable universally and not simply to Muslims. The problem is that Islam is radically monotheistic (like Judaism), yet is also (unlike Judaism, which is the religion of one people) universalistic as well.<sup>38</sup>

compromised forms of monotheism'. It is interesting that the kabbalistic tradition that informs his theological thinking may be described in the same words. To the outsider there appear to be structural similarities between kabbalistic, Trinitarian, and Hindu understandings of God. It is thus no accident that a kabbalistically minded rabbi entertains notions of softer and more complex monotheism. Hinduism is compromised monotheism, and as such is valid.

Something further is gained by this move. Religions with compromised monotheism are only valid for non-Jews. Such was the view of the early modern rabbis who upheld Christianity's value on the grounds of permissible *shituf*. In the contemporary context this provides a protective mechanism against Jewish attraction to Eastern religions. The argument echoes the teachings of Glazerson, but along more halakhic lines. What is permissible for non-Jews is considered idolatrous for Jews. Respect and protection of identity are achieved in one move.

Steinsaltz took his knowledge of Hinduism from a Hindu textbook, and in the process distorted a fact or two. Written from the perspective of Vedanta, the textbook allowed him to deal with the entire scope of Hinduism within a few lines. Perhaps it is advantageous to take a single perspective and develop a halakhic position from it, but one wonders whether more detailed study of the religion might make it harder to make broad pronouncements. Perhaps the context dictates the method. Steinsaltz wrote for a panel on religious tolerance, where he represented Judaism. Such situations seem to have their own dynamics, leading to results, even if positive in and of themselves, that are not always commensurate with the message that emerges from other contexts and genres. They bring out the best in a given presentation, but they are written in English and spoken academically. Would Steinsaltz also say these very things in Hebrew, in the framework of a *pesak*, a ruling of the halakhah?<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, he has certainly taken us a long way into thinking about Hinduism and *avodah zarab* and offered us a way of thinking that is systematic and grounded in the theological principles. Above all, it is an alternative to the impressions arising from the visual aspect of Hinduism and reminds us of the priority of theology over and against practice.