

Part III

The Other god: Defining Avoda Zara

Overview

As suggested already, some of the alternatives to the biblical-rabbinic paradigm of scorn and rejection emerged within the matrix of Jewish attempts to develop a positive appreciation of Christianity and Islam. These attempts provide us with approaches to another religion that are different in tone and attitude from the biblical-rabbinic paradigm. The same historical period also saw the rise of the first systematic treatments of Avoda Zara and the earliest attempts to identify what is wrong with it and to define its scope. It is therefore appropriate at this point in our discussion to revisit some of the classical articulations of Jewish views of Avoda Zara in general and of Christianity in particular, and to consider how they might, and in certain cases how they have, served as resources for developing a Jewish view of Hinduism. In relating these resources to the case of Hinduism we are called not simply to assess if and how they may be applied to Hinduism, but also to use the case of Hinduism as an occasion for considering the adequacy of these resources, approaches, and constructs to Judaism's present-day encounter with other religions.

This part of the book is its core, in terms of providing the building blocks for a view of another religion, as these may be culled from rabbinic (late rabbinic, i.e., medieval up to contemporary) literature. It is important to state that in most of what follows we do not come across specific views of rabbinical authorities concerning Hinduism. For the most part, our task is to extract models, theoretical possibilities, that could inform our view of Hinduism. This is why this part is the densest and most demanding part of the book. If we are to suggest models or approaches that could be applied to Hinduism, we must engage the sources thoroughly, understanding their concerns, their limits, and how we might legitimately work with them. Making these sources speak to our situation requires close reading of some fundamental texts, so that our application of their approach is responsible. Because of the detailed nature of the argument in this part of the book, I assume that some readers who are less familiar with rabbinic reasoning may have a hard time working through some of the details of the argument. Let

me, therefore, provide a brief summary of key points that emerge from each of the chapters in this part of the book.

Chapter 6 presents the view of Maimonides on Avoda Zara. Maimonides' work is possibly the most influential on the subject. It consists of specific rulings concerning Christianity (which he considers to be Avoda Zara) but also theoretical discussions of the historical formation of Avoda Zara as well as its core legal definition. In terms of precedent, Maimonides' ruling on Christianity, if extended to Hinduism, would lead to the conclusion that Hinduism too is Avoda Zara. For many, this has been a default position and it readily accounts for the ease with which the category was applied to Hinduism in cases such as the sheitel crisis. But Maimonides does provide additional resources, which leave pause for thought regarding how they might be applied to Hinduism. He offers the core legal definition of Avoda Zara—the worship of any being besides God. This definition opens up a space for inquiry into the intentions and the theological understanding of practitioners of other religions. Could it be that what seems to us the worship of another God is really the worship of God?

Of great interest is also Maimonides' historical presentation of the coming of Avoda Zara into human history. Following Maimonides' track of thought suggests a very particular view of how Avoda Zara is understood. Another being is worshipped in order to please God, in a mistaken understanding of His will. This ultimately leads to forgetting God and to the widespread growth of superstition. Contrasting this description of the evolution of Avoda Zara with the self-understanding of Hinduism suggests there are significant gaps. Hindu thinkers would not recognize the nature of their worship of deities as conforming to this model, or for that matter to the broader medieval understanding of Avoda Zara as a consequence of approaching intermediaries. A close reading of Maimonides suggests there are gaps in his presentation, specifically the worship of God Himself through wrong means, such as images. The gaps in Maimonides' presentation are precisely where an engagement with Hinduism becomes particularly interesting. It may be that what was taken for granted, or left unexplored, by Maimonides' presentation is exactly the position that Hindu thinkers might choose to identify with. If so, what bearing could that have on our view of Hinduism as Avoda Zara? Beyond that, thinking of Hinduism in light of Maimonides' presentation raises the question of whether we can import theoretical and theological criteria from one religious system to another, which thinks in entirely different ways.

Chapter 7 presents the views of Nachmanides, an equally prominent voice in medieval rabbinic Judaism. Unlike Maimonides' work, which is incorporated in a legal corpus, Nachmanides' work is encountered in his commentary on the Torah. This is likely the reason why his views have had little impact on the history of halachic thinking concerning other religions. The present analysis seeks to integrate his views into the broader context of views of other religions, by making them address a novel situation that neither Nachmanides nor any of the other figures discussed in this part of the book had ever encountered or engaged.

Two principles are fundamental to Nachmanides' understanding of Avoda Zara. The first is that the core definition of Avoda Zara concerns the making

of a bond of faith and commitment, through which a relationship to a being as one's "God" is affirmed. Matters of ritual, including the use of images, would be secondary to this core definition. The second principle of his presentation is that the prohibition of Avoda Zara is relevant to the Jewish people in ways it is not relevant to the rest of humanity. As part of the special covenant that exists between God and Israel, Israel is committed to give divine allegiance to no other being save God. The rest of humanity is not under such a commitment, even though some dimension of Avoda Zara applies to them as well. Unlike Maimonides, who applies identical criteria for Jews and non-Jews, Nachmanides distinguishes between them. This would lead us at every juncture, then, to pose the question of whether what is being spoken of as Avoda Zara is meant for Jews or for non-Jews as well. This is one of the most fundamental questions that a discussion of another religion as Avoda Zara must consider and it is one that is often overlooked.

Nachmanides recognizes various forms of worship or allegiance to other beings, which are appropriate for other nations. These are couched in a cosmic, angelological framework and are based on a cosmic structure, which when understood based on correct knowledge reveals the celestial, astrological, and even demonic powers that are the lot of each nation. Nachmanides' structure even includes the possibility of worship of humans, within this broader cosmic view. All these are considered by Nachmanides to be legitimate and appropriate under certain circumstances.

The conditions under which worship of other beings may be condoned is first and foremost that it does not eclipse knowledge of God who, by this cosmic view, is at the head of the cosmic hierarchy. Nachmanides does not require that God be worshipped, but knowledge of Him must not be forgotten due to worship given to other beings. The second condition implied in Nachmanides' presentation is that such worship conform to the divinely ordained cosmic structure, in other words that the nations worship powers that really are associated with them.

On the face of it, Nachmanides' discussion is neither relevant to the Christianity that he knew, nor to the Hinduism he had no idea of. A strict reading of his commentary in context would confine his views to powers and practices that are not the ones under discussion. My analysis, however, examines what might be extracted from Nachmanides' views as resources for the present discussion of Hinduism. It assumes that his view provides us with a model that can be applied under different circumstances. The "scientific" dimension of his view of permissible worship of other beings may find a correspondence in other kinds of "scientific" approaches, characteristic of Hinduism. In any event, his discussion is certainly relevant to revising our thought on Avoda Zara. What we might have been certain would be Avoda Zara, based on the common Maimonidean perspective, turns out to be permissible and part of a divinely given cosmic order. This certainly suggests there is more than one possible approach to Avoda Zara. It invites us to continue in our search for precedents and in further interrogating the category of Avoda Zara.

Despite significant substantive differences that have bearing on a possible Jewish position on Hinduism as Avoda Zara, both Maimonides and Nachmanides rely on a similar understanding of Avoda Zara, in metaphysical and theoretical

terms. This understanding will be contrasted with common understandings of Hinduism. The question at hand is to what extent the basic understanding of Avoda Zara, developed during the Middle Ages, coheres with the self-understanding of major schools of Hindu thought and what, if anything, would be the significance of the differences between these understandings.

Chapter 8 introduces a position and a concept that has played a major role in a Jewish view of Christianity as (non) Avoda Zara. This position, in many ways the opposite of that of Maimonides, shares with Nachmanides the view that different criteria apply to Jews and non-Jews when it comes to Avoda Zara. Non-Jews may worship another being alongside God. This position is referred to as *Shituf*, the association of another being alongside God. The position that *Shituf* is permissible to non-Jews is more demanding than the view of Nachmanides. For Nachmanides, all that was required was that knowledge or awareness of God's existence not be lost. For proponents of the permissibility of *Shituf*, the requirement is that God be worshipped, with the realization that the worship of another being at the same time does not constitute Avoda Zara. This position has evolved from an ad-hoc solution to certain practical problems to a principled view of other religions, primarily Christianity. It has come to inform a Jewish ethos of tolerance. Different paths and different standards apply to Jews and non-Jews. The practices of non-Jews can therefore be condoned, while the integrity of Jewish practice and identity is maintained by insistence on the special demands made of Jews, as part of their special relationship with God.

The position affirming permissibility of *Shituf* has been one of the main resources available to contemporary Jewish authors, as they sought to think of Hinduism. Hinduism, it was suggested, could be seen in much the same way that Christianity was, a religion valid for its practitioners but off limits for Jews. This assumed Hindus worship God, in some sense familiar to us Jews, but at the same time they also worshipped various forces of nature, gods, and holy men, while never forgetting God completely. The discussion presents in detail the position of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, an important contemporary rabbinic voice, who applies this strategy also to Hinduism, as part of a broader effort at establishing a Jewish theology of religions, under the concept of tolerance.

Chapter 9 continues the discussion of *Shituf*. Whereas Chapter 8 presented the category and its possible applicability to Hinduism, Chapter 9 queries the category from various angles, critical and constructive. On the critical side, it poses the question of whether the category has theological value and veracity, beyond the value it obviously possesses in terms of historical precedents. A closer scrutiny of the category suggests it is ill-suited to describe Christian faith. In a similar vein, it may not describe Hindu faith in a way that conforms to Hindu self-understanding. We are faced, then, with the challenge of applying a category that can be helpful in terms of relations, as well as in terms of internal rabbinic processes and precedents, while recognizing its theological shortcomings.

On the constructive side, the discussion in Chapter 9 takes the notion of permissibility of *Shituf* and asks what kind of a broader religious understanding can be constructed out of what began as a legal construct for solving day-to-day issues. Can we develop a theology of *Shituf*? The discussion offers suggestions

for how one could account theologically for the permissibility of Shituf. This is understood here in terms of collapsing the end and means into one totality, which points Godward. This discussion takes place primarily in relation to holy people, following the classical application of the category to Jesus. This precedent is extended to attitudes to *gurus* and holy men and women in Hinduism and their view as divine. If we are to take Shituf as a serious theological possibility, then two parallel theological models must be set up, one for Jews and one for non-Jews. And if we see in this an ideal teaching of the Torah, then these two views must be able to speak to each other in a valid theological dialogue representing two views on Shituf. In such a dialogue the Jewish refusal of Shituf must be heard as a testimony to one understanding of the spiritual life, while at the same time Judaism could develop a finer appreciation of the spiritual possibilities entailed in the permission for non-Jews to worship through Shituf.

Chapter 10 introduces us to the thought and legal position of Rabbi Menachem Meiri, a fourteenth-century rabbinic authority. Meiri is principled in his view of both Christianity and Islam, and for that matter probably all religions of his time, as not being under the charge of Avoda Zara. Like Maimonides, Meiri does not distinguish between Jew and non-Jew, applying the same criteria to both. His criteria, however, are unlike those of Maimonides or of the proponents of permissibility of Shituf. Meiri uses moral living and the religious ordering of a moral society as the primary criteria for recognizing the validity of a contemporary religion. While morality does not replace theology, it does serve as a pointer and indicator to the quality of the religious life, and therefore to the God who is behind the religion. A religion that shows moral living, grounded in some understanding of God, is legitimate. Meiri is willing to overlook theological error, as well as all that relates to the domain of worship. In many ways, it is the most promising classical approach available, if we seek to develop a positive appreciation of Hinduism.

Upon further consideration, we discover that Meiri does not simply apply the criterion of morality to absolve a religion of the charge of Avoda Zara, but actually operates with a robust notion of what a “religion” is. This notion is informed by the ultimate teleology of the religion, witnessed by the moral living and based upon some minimal theological premises required to uphold the entire structure. Once a religion is recognized as being a “religion,” it is valid, free of charges of Avoda Zara, and ultimately on a par with Judaism, as far as serving mankind on the ultimate journey and providing meaning for life are concerned.

Meiri’s work provides a very promising basis for a view of other religions, Hinduism included. It provides criteria that are readily met and recognized, without forcing on another religion theological understanding that distorts its own self-understanding. By focusing on what matters most to him and putting aside concern for worship and the concrete forms of the religious life, Meiri provides us with a position that could readily apply to a Jewish view of Hinduism, without requiring much theological acrobatics.

Meiri’s work has been outside the rabbinic mainstream for certain historical reasons and has only in past decades received broader attention. Because of this, many authorities feel uneasy adopting his position, rather than those that

have been part of rabbinic discourse for centuries. However, in terms of doing the required theological and halachic work in a clean way, based on a thorough and systematic view of religion, without doing injustice to the other's self-understanding, Meiri could serve as a guide to contemporary Jewish views of other religions. Some contemporary rabbis have indeed applied Meiri's position to Hinduism, thereby taking it beyond the charge of Avoda Zara.