

[Jewish-Hindu Dialogue](#)

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Learning from Each Other-Hindus and Jews

Hinduism was not the first religion and culture to migrate from its homeland to America, Africa, Europe and the rest of the globe. The Jewish people have been there before us. Nathan Katz, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of South Florida, USA, believes a Hindu-Jewish dialogue is natural and necessary. He submitted to our editors this assessment of how two great traditions may learn to learn from each other.

By Prof. Nathan Katz

To paraphrase the traditional Judaic question: Why is the Hindu-Jewish encounter different from Hindu-Christian dialogue? For one thing, while interreligious dialogue has been a "tool for evangelization" in the hands of Christian missionaries, when Jews and Hindus converse there are no ulterior motives. For another, an overemphasis on the "absolute" (as a metaphysical or as mystical experience) predetermines the outcome of the dialogue. Underlying this search for absolutes is the Christian valuation of orthodoxy (right belief) over orthopraxy (right action). Most Hinduisms and Judaisms, on the contrary, value practice over doctrine, and this inversion characterizes Hindu-Jewish dialogue.

Another feature is symmetry. As Indian and Jewish-Americans meet in the work place or the public arena, one of the first discoveries is of similar social position in the context of American society.

Symmetry is also part of our historical experiences. This point is conveyed by a story. I was in Rome with a Buddhist monk from Bangkok. We decided to visit the

Vatican's Museum of World Religions. Entering the Buddhism section, my companion stopped short, confronted by a large Thai Buddharupa (image of the Buddha). Inquiring about his obvious distress, he stammered: "That rupa was stolen from my monastery. For years I'd heard that Christians had taken it, but I never believed that story. What kind of person would steal a sacred object from a temple? But here it is." And he indicated the inscription identifying it from his temple. I commiserated with his pain-then it was my turn for a shock. In the Judaism section Torah scrolls were displayed, one of them from the Great Synagogue of Budapest, the home of my mother's family. Quite possibly, my unknown cousins who had been slaughtered in the Holocaust had read from that very scroll. I knew more deeply what my Thai friend had experienced, just as he understood my anguish at seeing this Torah scroll. This, too, is part of the Hindu-Jewish dialogue. This, too, is the symmetry between our religions, a symmetry of religious intolerance against our peoples.

What is the Hindu-Jewish dialogue? Based on my own experiences over the past twenty years, I offer the following:

1. The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is about the Absolute and practices leading to the Absolute. To maintain that it is a mistake to focus upon orthodoxy to the neglect of orthopraxy, so too is it a mistake to neglect philosophy and mysticism entirely.

2. As traditions which emphasize orthopraxy, the area of dietary laws has been on the forefront of Hindu-Jewish religious interactions in America. Enterprising Tamil restauranteurs in New York City, selling "kosher doshas," proudly display hechshers (rabbinic seals of approval), and Hindu "Brahmin" restaurants offer a kosher dining alternative for the observant Jew. Our dietary codes overlap, and these are areas for communication and cooperation. A faithful Hindu is as concerned as the observant Jew about the chemistry of rennet, or the presence of lard in baked goods. Food can be kosher, just as it can be prasadam, and a comparative study of the meaning of food regulations would be worthwhile.

3. The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about our experiences of oppression and intolerance, as my Thai monk friend and I understood viscerally at the Vatican's museum. We Hindus, Buddhists and Jews can better understand our own history by comparing notes with one another.

4. The dialogue is also about preserving culture in the face of diasporization and modernization. Today we see two kinds of diaspora: the forced exile of the Tibetans, Vietnamese and Cambodians, and the voluntary exile of American Hindus. We Jews experienced the first until 1948, but since the establishment of Israel, galut (exile) has become our home voluntarily. Many American Hindus rightly or wrongly see American Jews as role models: we are taken as fully participating in American life while maintaining religious and cultural traditions. Hebrew day schools, federations, newspapers, self-defense organizations, youth summer camps and lobbying organizations for both domestic and international issues are models for other minority peoples who fear assimilation and the loss of traditions.

Diasporization shatters the premodern sense of a nation as a confluence of land-people-language-religion. If one is landless, then the fusion of these four separable factors unravels. Similarly, the essence of modernization is pluralism wherein one's sacred canopy is seen as a cultural product rather than eternal meanings. Diasporization confronts one with the other, and so does modernization, and in this sense the two are related. Jews are seen as the first diasporized and the first modernized people, even if in our case the former preceded the latter by 1600 years. Peoples who are just now becoming diasporized and/or modernized tend to look to Jews for guidance.

5. The Hindu-Jewish dialogue in America has concerns specific to minority religious culture here. For example, both ethnic groups have an interest in a strong, secular, public education system. Both communities strive against discrimination in housing, the work place and in schools, as well as against violence from the Klan and other Nazi-like organizations. Parents in both communities fear unscrupulous missionaries. Finally, both American Hindus and Jews have deep ties to their countries of origin, and both groups want the American government to reflect their sentiments in "special relationships" with India and Israel.

6. The dialogue is itself multicultural; that is, there are and have been Hindu-Jewish dialogues in America, in India and elsewhere. The long overdue establishment of ambassadorial relations between India and Israel, so enthusiastically welcomed by Hindus as well as Jews, is another, contemporary aspect of Hindu-Jewish dialogue.

7. What I have been calling "Hindu-Jewish" dialogue involves both religion and ethnicity (the latter a distinctly American formulation). While any dialogue may

emphasize one aspect, we need to be clear about which we are discussing.

8. This dialogue is not a monologue among Jews. I know one Hillel (campus organization) rabbi who sponsored a "Buddhist-Jewish" dialogue between a rabbi and a Jewish mediator! As a prerequisite to our participation, we must involve real people, not our projections.

9. Hindu-Jewish dialogue ought not be an addendum to Hindu-Christian dialogue. What most Hindus know of Judaism was learned from Christian missionaries, for whom Judaism is but step toward Christianity. We must insist on our unique identity in our relations with Hindus, and our identity as Jews is threatened by being subsumed into the missionaries' "Judaeo-Christian" fiction.

In conclusion: Hindu-Jewish dialogue is an ancient encounter which dates back more than two millennia. Since western universities arose out of Christian cultures, Christian categories dominate most of the humanities and social sciences, religious studies in particular. A retrieval of links between Hindus and Jews reconfigures not only our understandings of Judaism and Hinduism, but the very manner in which we go about doing interreligious dialogue, and beyond that our understanding of the very concept of "religion" becomes modified when Hinduism and Judaism meet symmetrically.

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