Our Hindu-Jewish Romance
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IN MY OPINION

Our Hindu-Jewish Romance

A few of the reasons why Jews and Hindus enjoy a unique camaraderie in this pluralistic world

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Hindus and Jews love each other. We all know that. This does not mean that we love our Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or secular neighbors any the less, but we Jews and Hindus have an instinctual simpatico. I will explain why this is the case.

First, Jews have lived freely in India for perhaps two thousand years. When the Cochin Synagogue celebrated its four hundredth anniversary in 1968, it was a major news event in India. Hindus pride themselves on tolerance, and India's unique position as the only nation in the world with no anti-Semitism reinforces this cherished self-perception. When Jews come to learn that some of us have lived freely, peacefully and creatively for so long in India, we are surprised and delighted, and we admire Hinduism as the only civilization immune to Jew-hatred. We learn that anti-Semitism is not universal, and that it is possible to preserve Jewish identity and religion in the absence of persecution. For this, we feel deep gratitude.

Second, ours are the two oldest religions in the world. Judaism is the mother of the younger faiths of Christianity and Islam, just as Hinduism is the source of Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Our ancient religions have sacred languages, Sanskrit and Hebrew, and hereditary priesthoods, brahmins and kohanim. We have dietary codes, we purify ourselves in special tanks, and our brides circle their husbands seven times. The ritual parallels seem endless.

The Hindu American community, like the Jewish American community, is enriched by internal pluralism, each group comprising both traditional and secularized people. We encourage our liberals to collaborate, and at the same time we are pleased by interreligious cooperation between swamis and rabbis.

Both Hinduism and Judaism are non-proselytizing faiths, so we find it difficult to understand those who target us for conversion. We are sensitive about monotheistic zealots who besmirch our religions, and we work together to strive against such defamation. In America, Jews are "elder brothers " of Hindus; as such, we instinctively jump to defend a Hindu community's plans to build a temple when, as is sometimes the case, local folk object. Jews believe that our freedom of religion is best protected by ensuring that all religious minorities enjoy this same right.

On the traditional side, leading rabbis and swamis recently overcame one thorny issue that has stood in the way of our mutual affection. For the past 1,500 years or more, what in English is called "idolatry " has clouded Jewish perceptions of Hinduism. Happily, this issue may have been resolved once and for all at a February 2007 dialogue in New Delhi between members of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, a body which speaks with authority in the Jewish world, and the Dharma Acharya Sabha, a similarly august Hindu group. Led respectively by Rabbi Yona Metzger and Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the rabbis and the swamis issued a nine-point statement of principles, the first of which removed the "idolatry " issue from the table: "Their respective Traditions teach that there is One Supreme Being who is the Ultimate Reality, who has created this world in its blessed diversity and who has communicated Divine ways of action for humanity, for different peoples in different times and places." This acknowledgement by credible rabbis and swamis that the same G-d is the source of their two faiths is a major step forward for our relationship, enabling our traditionally religious members to join our secular ones in this symbiosis of mutual support and enrichment.

The poet asks, "How do I love thee?" We Hindus and Jews count many ways indeed.