

Hindu-Jewish Scholars' Meeting, May 24-26, 2011

**Initiative of Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha and
World Council of Religions Leaders**



Pujya Swamiji headed the fifth dialogue between the Hindu and Jewish religious leadership, May 24-26, 2011, at the India Habitat Centre in Delhi. Two introductory summits, the first in Delhi in 2007 and the second in Jerusalem in 2008, resulted in significant Declarations of understanding, and the constitution of a scholars' group to explore issues in greater depth. Of particular interest for both groups was the question of idolatry in Hinduism. The charge of

idolatry has formed the justification for centuries of assault on the Hindu tradition. While the Jews were never part of this, Jewish Law prohibits benefitting from interactions, or in more stringent interpretations, even interacting with idolaters. Even though the issue was resolved, as expressed in Article 3 of the Declaration the Second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit, 2008,



“It is recognized that the One Supreme Being, both in its formless and manifest aspects, has been worshipped by Hindus over the millennia. This does not mean that Hindus worship ‘gods’ and idols’. The Hindu relates to only the One Supreme Being when he/she prays to a particular manifestation”,

the Jewish participants, on returning to Israel and sharing their findings with other learned Rabbis, met with resistance. This prompted Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber to undertake a broader study of the issue, resulting in a 74-page paper that formed the basis for discussion in the recent meetings in Delhi. On the basis of his research, Rabbi Sperber was unable to reconcile Hinduism as non-idolatrous according to Maimonides, the traditional authority on Jewish law. However, based on his own understanding

of the Hindu concept of God, he was convinced that Hinduism is not idolatrous, and sought legal support for this by considering different definitions of idolatry from other respected Rabbinical traditions. His efforts to reconcile his own understanding with the worship of forms led him to conclude that the forms are ‘mere symbols’, and that Hindu worship of forms is equivalent to the practice of some Jewish people of praying to Angels, who are intermediaries to the ‘One Supreme Being’. Left unresolved for him was the *atma-brahman* identity, and he attempted to resolve it by considering the views of other *sampradayas*. Finally he concluded, “while a Jew may not accept this Hindu *Advaita Vedânta* philosophical stance, and may regard it, from his own viewpoint as heterodox, it can hardly be seen as idolatrous,”



Thus, the central topic of discussion in these meetings was the concept of God. After a welcome and introduction by Bawa Jain of the World Council of Religions Leaders, Pujya Swamiji began:

The concept of God is a very big thing. There is a certain conclusion that Advaita is heterodox. All that is here is one reality. It is not a belief. If it is not a belief it is a matter of understanding, something to be proved epistemologically. This concept is radical. The whole culture is based on this—that there is one reality, only God. We would like to make ourselves understood. And we would also like to have a clear definition of what you mean by God—it's not that we have to explain all the time. Whether we agree or not, we have proved that we can work together. We should be

able to accommodate each other happily. This [discussion of this topic] has been waiting for some time.

Mr. Oded Wiener, Director General of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel happily remarked, "When we dialogue with other religions, there is a rule that we do not talk about theological issues. With the Hindus it is just the opposite!"

Rabbi Sperber opened his discussion of his paper with, "I come here as an acolyte. . . wanting to learn." He proved true to his word, and the intellectual honesty of the Rabbis and their interest in understanding, created conditions for Pujya Swamiji to, in effect, conduct a series of classes for the next day and a half. Pujya Swamiji's unfoldment of how there is only one reality, both

immanent and transcendent, not only resonated with the Rabbis, as it concurs with their own texts, but opened their minds with the possibility of understanding it—a possibility that is not entertained in their own tradition. They welcomed this radical possibility. The area of greatest difficulty was understanding, “I am that reality,” as it challenged deep-rooted ideas within their tradition.

Related to this was the struggle of the Rabbis to understand what a deity is. Rabbi Sperber had concluded in his paper that a consecrated Hindu image is a mere symbol, and that Hindu worship of forms is equivalent to the practice of some Jewish people of praying to Angels as intermediaries to the Supreme Being. Pujya Swamiji clarified this, in a separate session, patiently showing how the world is a manifestation of Isvara. This paved the way to address Rabbi Sperber’s conclusion that the popular Hindu understanding of worship of deities is different from that of the Acaryas. Pujya Swamiji resolved this by making it clear that every Hindu, in every tradition, will say that everything is Bhagavan. At the time of discussion, and more formally at the farewell dinner, the Rabbis expressed their deep appreciation for this new understanding.

The third and fourth working sessions looked into the calendars of religious

observances. What are the holy days and how do they relate to God? What is considered holy time, holy space, and how do they relate to the people, land, faith, and culture? Beginning the discussion, H. H. Mahamandelshwara Swami Avadeshnanda Giri, Trustee of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha, overwhelmed the Rabbis with a detailed account of the panchanga. H.H. Swami Krishnamaniji and Sri Swami Paramatmanandaji contributed to the discussion. Chief Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and head of the American Jewish Committee, with the participation of Mr. Oded Weiner, gave an informative description of the Jewish holy days and their significance, most especially in terms of the history of the Jewish people.

In the concluding session, Mr. R. Venkatanarayanan and Mr. Oded Weiner led a frank and exploratory discussion for charting the way forward. It was evident that deep bonds of understanding and respect had now formed to support what is sure to be an ongoing, productive dialogue. A farewell dinner hosted by the Delhi Jain community, brought an outpouring of mutual appreciation among all the participants, and expressions of reverential gratitude for Pujya Swamiji as Guru.

*Report by
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