A rabbi discovers it is very hard to get away from Jews—although some good Jews manage very well without a rabbi

Jewish Footprints in India

Andre Ungar

Because it is there! the rabbi coins a phrase when asked by baffled congregants why, of all places, he chose to go to the Indian subcontinent for his summer vacation. The truth, nothing but the truth...but not the whole truth. He also went to sniff exotic art, architecture, landscape, music, and theologies. Shocking to admit, he decided on India because that's just about as far away as you can get from the normal daily realities of his life: Jews, that is. A guy needs a change.

Easier said than done. Remember Jonah and Nineveh and the big fish. Evasion of responsibilities does not seem to work. You buzz off to forget (temporarily, therapeutically only, you chirp) your fellow Jews. So they come traipsing after you (physically, figuratively; who's counting anyway?). I was positively haunted. A small mercy though: at least I did not bump into the standard, Hilton-circuit, American Jew in his flowered bermudas and her sequinned sunglasses. If they were around, they must have been safely tucked away in their airconditioned buses or in their gaggles of guided gawkers at mandatory sites. No. it was a very different presence of Jews that kept seeping on my heels.

An hour out of Kathmandu, past dazzling rice paddies and dizzy Himalayan slopes, nestles Dakshinkali, a holy city of Nepal. Garlands of bright flowers hang from the neck of the Goddess Kali, divinity of death. There are gongs and bells and flutes and chanting; people bow and kneel and lie flat on their faces in silent worship. And the ground is slippery with blood; goats and chickens are beheaded for Kali every minute. German tourists click their cameras, enquiring Nepalis hawk supposedly ancient manuscripts and masks. A slender young woman marches grimfaced away from the sacred slaughterhouse. As she passes the rabbi he glimpses a large silver necklace forming what looks like stylized Hebrew characters dangling on her blouse. "Pardon me," he mumbles, unaccustomed to accosting strange women but unable to restrain the curiosity. She halts, smiles, and in impeccable Sabra Hebrew reads the motto she bears: "Those who love never grow old." An admirable, if doubtful, sentiment. Perhaps she practices what she preaches, and it works after all. From there it is downhill all the way. An exuberantly dedicated Hebrew school teacher from somewhere in Canada, she was exploring India all summer long. Wholly in love with it. The scene just witnessed? "Go'el nefesh," she mutters, "an abomination." But then she cocks her head to the side. "Mind you...when I think of it, the Bet ha-Mikdash, the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, also,..." So it goes.

Pondicherry, a sleepy palmfringed white city on the Bay of Bengal, was French until about a decade ago. Tatters of la gloire still hang over the lush park, on street signs, on the lips of rickshaw men. But it is now wholly part of the Indian Republic, of the State of Tamil Nadu. What makes it unique, and a bit of a magnet too, is the lingering presence of a dead guru. Sri Aurobindo started out as a Bengali poet and social revolutionary. While in jail he got religion, and thereafter applied himself to spiritual matters, and with marked effect. He had a worldwide following, created his ashram in Pondicherry, dreamed of building a new city nearby where his spiritual and ethical goals would be realized and radiate across the globe. After his death his former mistress—referred to simply as The Mother—took over the enterprise and ran it pretty efficiently until her own demise. Since then the organization runs itself, sort of, both in the midcity ashram and in the incipient celestial city of Auroville rising slowly—very very slowly—from the virgin bush a dozen miles away.

And here I met the brothers. Nice Jewish boys from Westchester, one in his late twenties, the other in his mid-thirties. They have been there for years and years. They belong, after a fashion. The older is one of the pioneers in Auroville, lives in a beautiful wooden one-room structure he and his friends built from scratch with their own hands. Next to no furniture at all; the only books are the works of Sri Aurobindo. In a corner the

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American's enchanting blond daughter is playing with a friend, both of them stark naked and shining. She is called Aurojane...all children born in the place incorporate Big Daddy's name in their own. Outside, the monsoon turns the world into an ocean of mud.

I remember suddenly the kibbutz I once lived on, decades ago. The same cheerful scorn of possessions, city life, the old ways. But the marijuana cigarette that's passed around doesn't quite fit the memory. Shy, lumpy conversation about America and the world—a blend of contemptuous sadness and plain homesickness in the man's voice. Here he is a baker. He is dedicated to the making of bread, honest, natural, wholesome bread, made with his own hands and skills. No cellophane-packed supermarket loaves of cardboard, no sir. The real thing. He has built a bit of a reputation already. Of course no private profit is involved; only a proud share of a collective enterprise. Besides, the baking is also a spiritual discipline, a sort of Yoga itself. Then a slow smile spreads on the stubbled, handsome cheeks. "Last month I made some knishes. Can you imagine, knishes, here?" He chuckles, then adds, proud and embarrassed all at once. "They tasted pretty good too."

The younger brother is a bit of a loner. He has been the route of the Sixties: Boston, California, Europe, then East. He stayed within the orbit of the midcity ashram in Pondicherry, meditates as do the rest at The Mother's deathbed—kept intact like a theatrical set—and her marble grave. He goes for an occasional swim in the tropical ocean. The rest of the time he runs a restaurant. He fled America to escape the hassles of the business world. Now he is an entrepreneur himself. He plans menus, haggles with suppliers, gives orders to a charming little waitress, decides about decor, worries about profit and loss. So far he's doing quite well, thank you.

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Will they ever go back? Both brothers avoid a clear answer. No, they have no plans to return. Nor is there any passionate insistence that their commitment is forever. There are snakes in paradise too, alas. Not only is their health recurringness assaulted by weird Asian maladies, not only are they living in a place whose language they do not speak at all, but the ideals themselves begin to wear a little thin after a while. Since The Mother's death there is conflict right within the movement. Ashram and Auroville are in fact rivals now. Indian disciples and imported devotees are engaged in a smiling but bitter power struggle. There has been slander, suspicion, betrayal, even—in Gandhi's land!—physical violence. The police have been called in to restore order. The French contingent darkly mutters about radical measures being needed. Something has gone out of the dream. Yet again: to slink back, tail between legs, and admit failure, disenchantment? How does one face Westchester...or oneself in the mirror? Meanwhile, there is work to do. The days, and the years, pass. somehow.

B y the broad, muddy, holy Ganges sprawls Benares, city of saints and scholars and beggars and pilgrims, burning ghats and erotic temples, cows and universities, reeking alleys and down-at-the-heel palaces. The sights and odors and sounds swirl in a hypnotic pattern. You have seen it, seen it all, explored every nook and cranny. You are satiated with mangoes and the sound of the sitar and tabla. What else is left? Then you remember. Why, how can you come to India and not consult an astrologer? Do it as a lark, a tiny gesture of curiosity, with a tinge of guilt as you recall that such dabblings are not exactly approved of in the Jewish tradition. Well, a wee peek can't hurt. So you look and eventually find.

Bare to the chest, the middle-aged man crouches cross-legged on a filthy sofa in a tiny dark room, dog-eared books within arm's reach. "You come from the United States, isn't it?" The shrewd eyes bore into you, smiling. I nod. Whereupon he leans closer, "Very good. You happen to know Sheila Goldberg?" He peers expectantly, then to be helpful adds, "From New York." To my regret—and to his—I confess that I do not. I don't think so, anyway. I try to explain that some names are fairly common, and that New York is really very big, but he won't be put off. From some recess he produces a sheaf of letters. The lady in question had come to see him months before; had marital problems and spiritual questions as well, spent time in an ashram in Rishikesh; was back in America; keeps writing urgent requests to the astrologer for advice and forecasts; the mail seems to get lost all the time....And so on and on. The guy, pretty obviously, is a faker but no fool. I can take him or leave him. But I am obsessed after a fashion by this woman I have never set eyes on, never spoken a word to.

But I might yet. A few days ago, entirely by accident, I was talking with a neighbor who mentioned a cousin of his, one Sheila Goldberg, who went over to India looking for something, maybe herself. Strange. Perhaps the man in Benares did have some curious insights after all.

I n the deep south, by hushed lagoons and huts of palmleaf, lies Kerala—Prosperous, articulate, Communist-voting Kerala. Its heart is the gorgeous city of Cochin. In Cochin lives the last remnant of one of the world's most remarkable Jewish communities. Yes, even a rabbi running away from Jews for himself. one Sheila Goldberg, who went off to India looking for something, maybe herself. Strange. Perhaps the man in Benares did have some curious insights after all.
through the narrow streets of Jewtown. At last a sharp turn into a courtyard, and the synagogue.

The breath catches in your throat as you step into the sanctuary. I must have seen hundreds of synagogues the world over, but none, absolutely none, as wholly beautiful. A small, exquisite space that is aglow with history and sanctity. There are, of course, no seats at all; you shed your shoes before you enter. The floor is covered from wall to wall with blue tiles imported from China hundreds of years ago. Each tile is different and made by human hand; each one a genuine work of art; in their totality a glorious tapestry. In the Ark the scrolls of Torah encased in lavish gold and silver containers in the traditional Sephardi style. Like a proud island, the Bimah rises in the center of the sanctuary. Overhead a mass of candelabra—silver, crystal, brass, glass; of different shapes and sizes and designs, a veritable garden growing upside down from the roof in lush tropical exotic exuberance.

A Mr. Cohen materializes and offers some explanations. According to the community’s own traditions, the pioneers came from the Land of Israel after the destruction of the Second Temple—who knows, maybe the First Temple. In Kerala several Jewish communities have flourished until eventually, for obscure historical reasons, Cochin emerged as the center. The building, he swells with sweet pride, was erected four hundred years ago. He hurries to unlock and then reverently unwrap the original brass tablets whereon the Maharaja of that day sanctioned the building of that synagogue and bestowed some privileges on its members. No, Mr. Cohen insists, there has never been any trace of persecution or unpleas-

antness with the neighbors. Peace and goodwill and mutual respect, with Hindu and Moslem, Jain and Buddhist alike. Indira Gandhi attended in person the quadricentennial celebrations, expressing her admiration for the Jewish community. Yes, the bulk of Cochin’s Jews had moved to Israel in the 1950’s, not to escape trouble, but drawn by the ancient Messianic hope. Some like it there, others find it hard. Those who remain are doing well. They are pretty prosperous: lawyers, physicians, businessmen. But they are shrinking, and there might come a critical point soon. Mr. Cohen puts the total number of Jews in Cochin at about seventy or eighty. Not very surprisingly intermarriage is a fact of life. Some move away to the big cities—Madras, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta. A handful remain. For how long, no one knows. And the synagogue remains. It is an official national monument, much to the regret of some outfit in California that offered to buy and ship its treasures to America, money no object. Perhaps disloyally I am delighted.

Is there a rabbi, I enquire. Mr. Cohen is beaming. No, sir. We don’t have one. As a matter of fact, we never did. Never. We just kept going, doing our own studying and praying and sticking together and bringing up our children Jewish. For my part I am awed, and a little humbled. This community survived centuries, maybe millennia, despite the absence of rabbis. Who knows, perhaps because of it. When, back in America, I mention this from the pulpit, a congregant comes up afterwards with a grin and says, “You know, Rabbi, if I were you, I wouldn’t say this too often. People might get ideas, right?” Amen to that. Or possibly, shanti, shanti.