

# WRITE-HAUS

HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

ISSUE 01







# Rituals

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“God’s Own Country.” That’s what the public service signs say throughout India’s southern state of Kerala. In Israel, where I’m from, many people believe the same of their Promised Land. Wandering around Kerala, from Kanyakumari at the tip, to Cochin with its 16th century synagogue located where else but in Jew Town, I see these “public service” signs and think about the volatility and fickleness of fate and fortune in the early decades of our 21st century. And so it doesn’t take a genius to appreciate the pragmatism of God having a diversified portfolio, which includes real estate. If one state becomes a nuclear wasteland or implodes into the abyss of the climate crisis, there’ll always be the other. Believers, alive and breathing, at least for a little while more.

As an American who moved to Israel decades ago, I never thought I'd travel to India. But Israelis do. By the thousands. Young people have a post-army ritual of filling a backpack and traveling up and down the highways and byways of this vast country, sometimes for months at a time. Then there are the empty nesters, like myself, who come for shorter spells and travel less. Since so many were doing it, I wanted to as well. For my fiftieth birthday, I decided to spend a week in an ashram in Kerala to practice yoga and meditation, and then travel around the state.

Indians have the impression that there are millions and millions of Israelis somewhere across the globe in their home country. Just like there are millions and millions of Indians on the sub-continent. But no, we correct them and point out that there are less than nine million people in the entire country. The numbers are quite shocking to them since there are eighteen million residents in Mumbai alone. But, Israelis, and I for that matter, are also quick to point out the many similarities between the two countries, similarities that make India so beloved.

Cuisine. Both countries grow and export bananas, dates, and mangos, and treat spicy food like a national hobby. Street life. Copious, frenetic, with open-air markets and incredibly pushy crowds. Driving. Mad, both in the sense of irrational and angry, though Israel has paved roads

with no cows on them. People. Warm, multi-hued, multi-ethnic and religious, hospitable. Both countries are former British colonies and suffered ambitious plans for partition in 1947. Weather. Hot, though India is hotter, especially down south. Especially in Kerala.

But extreme contrasts boggle the mind as well. India is huge, Israel is tiny. India has water, Israel is always on drought alert. Israelis are louder and ruder, but it's easier to understand their English. Indians' textile colors light up the soul, while dark colors dominate in Israel. Israel invented desert agriculture and sprouts high-tech startups like weeds. India's dated agricultural methods barely feed its population. Israel also has a major head start aligning itself with the cleanliness, efficiency, and the homogeneity of lifestyle goods and services common to the West. India doesn't even come close. When I first arrived in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, I was amazed to see streets crammed with cars, mopeds, goats, cows, bicycles, tuk-tuks, and a constant rolling river of pedestrians clutching or talking on cell phones. A mix of the best of contemporary technology mixed with the traditional, yet not a sidewalk in sight.

But differences aside, the greatest similarity between the two countries, the feature that reminds me most of home as I wander through Kerala, is the conspicuous



involvement with God. In addition to signs in English proclaiming that Kerala is God's Own Country, there is the proliferation of Hindu temples, Christian churches, and Muslim mosques in villages, cities, on roads in between towns. A profusion of houses of worship in a state that paradoxically has been consistently run by the Communist Party since Partition in 1947.

In Hebrew, the words for Jew and Indian are nearly identical. Indian *h-o-d-y* יהודי and Jew *y-h-o-d-y* יהודי. One little letter, the *yud* - *y* - a slight mark on the right side of the word - sets apart the two peoples. That little letter happens to also be one of God's names according to Jewish tradition and contains within its tiny precincts the biggest dissimilarity between the two countries' major God ways: the Jewish belief in one and the Hindu worship of many.

The Hindu murals, statues, and altars to different Gods I see on city streets and village lanes everywhere, seem utterly unlike the Christian statuary I know from New York, Europe, and churches in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and the Galilee. In this parallel world of God's Own Country, the Bible's Second Commandment - the outright veto of graven images - rises up loudly in me. Which surprises me. And confuses me, since even as a Jew I've been going to Catholic churches since childhood. I love the shadows, the flickering candles, the stained glass, the

atmosphere of contemplation and repose. But here, in Kerala, more than once in front of Hindu effigies - an ashram's black stone idol towering over us humans, a temple façade covered in colorful human and animal deities - I find myself shuddering, unintentionally, down to my Abrahamistic core.

But the country, the people, the culture are too fascinating to allow an ancestral aversion to idol worship to impinge on my plans. I visit many temples, I watch a long and joy-filled festival procession make its way down a village street. Elephants adorned with gold plates and flowers lead the crowd. Some people wear animal masks. Others carry floats with temples on them. And some men, naked to the waist, whip themselves with chains as they make their way through the crowd.

This gives me pause. I know people do this in other countries as well. I know that self-flagellation once held a place of importance in Europe's Christianity as well. But reading about something is one thing. Seeing it another. Frankly, it is not easy to see someone hit themselves to the point of bleeding. It is even harder to know they are doing it for a god who they believe expects this of them. I turn away, I simply cannot look at the body being punished in this way, and at the same time I push back against my reflex to judge and tell myself to be open, to be strong, and to accept that differences need to be respected. I knew this would

be especially significant for the next stop: the striking and important 17th century Thanumalayan Temple in Suchindram (with 9th century engravings on the walls, according to its website).

I turn off the heavily trafficked main road – buses, cars, tuk-tuks, pedestrians, and an occasional cow – and walk along a large pond with an ornate structure in the middle. I stare at it until I reach the seven-storied gate tower, aka *gopuram*, packed with stone creatures and live screech owls. This gets my attention only to prepare me for the enormous Temple behind it. The *gopuram* separates the noisy gritty streets from the clean courtyard and Temple. I am swept inside with many other worshippers who have come to receive blessings from Brahma, Vishnu, and the Siva lingam.

Slowly and very carefully, for the crowd is intense and, like in Israel, has no concept of personal space, I make my way in and hold my body tightly, not wanting to be jostled too much. The corridors are filled with ancient pillars carved into human-animal figures, some in sexually suggestive poses, others stare down knowingly or menacingly at the human crowd. Gods of different colors embraced by incense, candles, and garlands of fluorescent, fresh flowers repose in small niches. Priests hand out ash and *kumkum* to queues of people in front of each altar. I spread horizontal lines of grey on

my forehead. I press a large spot of red between my eyebrows. My Jewish soul keeps up a lively monologue with itself. It is watching me doing as the others do, and I remind myself to remain open and respectful and to learn. What magnificent architecture, what wonderful craftsmanship, such fascinating ceremonies!

Suddenly, a group of men with faces and bare chests covered in *kumkum* and ash race through the compound, pounding drums and chanting prayers to Siva. The space contracts. It fills with noise, grows darker. I move into the shadows to escape the stampede and feel like I've stumbled into an Indiana Jones movie. Trepidation and frenzy are in the air. Monkey faces glare down at me. Static snakes slither in cold stone. Worshippers throw themselves down on the stone floor in supplication. The drums grow stronger. My arms instinctively fold across my body and I move closer to the wall. It is all so new for me and I have no idea what will come next.

A priest performs *puja*. He throws holy water on the towering four-meter statue of Ganesh's green elephant-human form. In his passion, the priest douses himself in water and the crowd below, myself included.

I need air. Less noise. No ritual sprinkling. I push my way through the corridors and out of the Temple into daylight and rejoin

a sea of people outside. I go sit by the large sacred pond. There I breathe softly and try to shake off the intensity, the drumbeats, the dousing, the worship of idols. Who knew it would bother me this much?

So much I don't understand. How alien I feel. I drink water and wipe the sweat from my face with the bottom of my t-shirt. Suddenly, I remember Jimmy, who, twenty years earlier, worked for my father delivering auto parts in Manhattan.

One Friday morning, Jimmy came back trembling and ashen from making a delivery to Moses's garage in the west 40s.

"I'm not going back to Moses," Jimmy whispered to my father. "They're doing rituals."

My father did not understand.

"Moses had a black box on his head. And on his arm. Leather straps too, down his arm." Jimmy looked around. He didn't want the other men to hear. "He was saying strange things. His whole body was moving back and forth. Maybe he's drinking. Maybe he's... I don't know but I'm not going back." Jimmy's eyes showed fear and determination.

I came to the shop a few days later and my father told me the story of Jimmy and

Moses. I laughed at the misunderstanding. What seemed to be some kind of voodoo or witchcraft to Jimmy, originally from Tobago, was for us a familiar part of Jewish men's morning prayers: *tefillin*. Black leather boxes with Biblical verses inside and long leather straps that are wrapped around the head, the arm, the hand.

"They're doing rituals," I whisper to myself as the women in fabulously colored saris and men in white mundus and shirts pass by me on their way to buses and the main road.

They're doing rituals: purification immersions in the holy rivers and seas of India and the Galilee. They're doing rituals: *tefillin* and *kumkum* accenting the third eye.

They're doing rituals: uneaten cows and pigs. They're doing rituals: blood taboos and male priesthoods. They're doing rituals in one holy land or another.

"Welcome home," I say out loud amid the tumult of the street, "to God's Own Country."