Color. Spice. Bene Israel undulating tunes to Kol Nidre and “Selichot.” Women wearing saris and kipot. How does one do a “Mi Sheberach” at the URJ Rodef Shalom in Mumbai? One holds out one’s hands like “Namaste” and everyone else, one by one, puts their hands outside this sign of prayer, and then kisses their own hands. My goal in leading this community through the holidays was to enter into a process – as they only have rabbinic leadership during the High Holidays. They themselves report that they are “thirsty” for learning.

We met in August for a Selichot service, during which I introduced themes, questions, tunes which would accompany us throughout. I also asked congregants what they wanted from their High Holiday experience. The answers were “community involvement,” “belonging,” “inner peace,” “deep learning,” and “personal growth.” Another goal was to learn from their Indian context and to bridge Judaism and the larger Hindu world with hints of Buddhism in which they live. We continued the process by holding a study session on interpersonal dynamics and how to actually do repentance, Teshuva. A lively discussion with texts was the first gate which opened up on our way to unlocking many gates.

On Erev Rosh HaShanah, with a wild and loud Ganesha festival with firecrackers competing outside... and the monsoon rains bucketing down, we did a play reading of the Akedah as it was a way to involve everyone and allow them to play a part in the retelling and examination on this difficult narrative. But this is not the only way in which the unique and lovely voices of the community were heard. Many congregants, young and old, took their place on the bima to read the prayers. On Rosh HaShanah, during the Torah reading, we had a very emotional communal experience. The last couple to be called up was expecting a baby within a week. As I chanted “May your descendents be as plentiful as the stars in the sky and the sands of the sea”, I stopped and translated, and then blessed the couple so that they and their baby would keep the traditions of Bene Israel alive. Their healthy baby boy was born the day before Yom Kippur and we again came together to bless the new parents during our communal Sukkah building.

On the afternoon of Rosh HaShanah, the entire Jewish community of Mumbai gathers together for a “Tashlich” ceremony, to symbolically throw their sins into the ocean. There are prayers, the shofar is blown, but something else was bubbling under the service. Chatter also rang loudly through the community for it is also the community’s traditional time for matchmaking. Parents, mostly mothers, are responsible for finding a suitable bride or groom for their children so everyone wears their best and brightest clothes.

In all gatherings, the treasured and holy Bene Israel tunes are always included and remain a defining element of the prayer community. This is a community of strong tradition.

On Yom Kippur, we opened the ark to invite each and every person to have private and special holy time before the Torah.

During my Yizkor sermon, walking across the theological bridge between Judaism and the dominant culture in India, I was asked about reincarnation, the World to Come and our varied tradition. The answers are multi-layered and ambiguous, with many colorful midrashim speaking of the World to Come for the righteous as a collective. But using the ambiguity to the full, I suggested that Yom Kippur is a day between life and death, which ends with Shema Yisrael. Here is a time to choose life and to begin again, making our lives as full of meaning, community and learning as we can.

I have a sense that India, in general, is in need of so many faces of God and of spirituality because of the harshness of life. You see people praying everywhere, or doing yoga or meditating. And wearing bright colors, no two materials seem the same in the sea of colors. Yet despite the color and spices of communal life I witnessed and took part in, it would not be a full picture of India without mentioning the great poverty that is part of life in the streets.

The morning of Erev Rosh HaShanah, I woke up early, before my traveling companion and walked outside our modest hotel to the promenade along the seafront. There, on the pavement, right outside our hotel, was a family of six asleep on the pavement. The youngest children were not wearing garments of any kind on the bottom half of their bodies. I suggested to myself that the parents couldn’t afford diapers and had nowhere to wash soiled clothes and dry them. On my way back from the seafront, the family was awake, seemed to have no breakfast. The mother was selling roses. I bought two bunches and paid enough for the family to buy food and maybe some clothing. The mother looked deeply into my eyes, she understood my intention. I thought of the liturgy, Repentance, Prayer and Tzedaka avert the evil decree. I thought of the limitless luxury of our Western lifestyle.

India smells of incense and cardamom, and cows and sometimes too many car fumes. One feels that there is a sitar in the air, and a pipe of music and often there is, because there is always a festival. Among the mixed spices of many religions, we as Jews together lifted our voices in song and prayer.

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