A Lesson on Strength in Small Numbers
My Volunteer Experience with the Indian Jewish Community
Seven months ago I left Los Angeles and the comforts of home to serve with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) as a JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corps (JSC) fellow in Mumbai, India. I have now been home three weeks and it feels as though I never left Southern California. It's not just that the palm tree-lined drives, yoga pants, and health food stores are the same as they always have been, it's that I can go three or four days here without having a single incident or a single moment remind me of the six months I lived in India.

Mumbai is swarming with humanity. You simply cannot escape the crowds of purple, yellow, red and blue saris; the smells of curry leaves frying and cardamom steaming; the throat-burning fumes of chili peppers crushed by hot rubber tires in highway underpasses; the drumming and chanting and music blasting from every corner and housing complex. Add to that the taxis battling rickshaws to swerve across five lanes of traffic; men shouting “madam!” to invite you into their shops of walls lined with ground and whole spices, fried snacks, day-old newspapers, too-sweet sweets, dried fruit and nuts, low-quality sandals, scarves, oils, soaps, chocolates, cleaning supplies, broken electronics all for sale at a “very good price.” The faces crease with both purpose and desperation and, as with everything in India, the contrast is remarkable.

Los Angeles is a nice quiet town in comparison, but unlike the stereotype of small-town living, it’s lonely compared to my experience in the tidal wave of Mumbai. Through all the hustle and bustle, a rather small community of 4500 Jews manages to stay strong, connected, and active. Serving with the JDC opened my eyes to a world of Judaism unknown to most people. In this world, they have Hanukkah festivals where people of all ages come together to watch youth (and outsiders like me) perform Bollywood dances. In this world, they have prayer books written in Hebrew, English, Hindi and Marathi. In this world, they have deep and meaningful devotions to Judaism on personally religious and globally attuned levels.

The Indian Jews are thirsty for knowledge and community. People who attend Hebrew class want to be fluent. They attempt to have conversations with their classmates solely in Hebrew even though many are beginners. Those who attend Torah study classes demand answers to questions such as, “what is the meaning of life?” and eagerly pile into the classroom after a full day’s work. The women’s group asserts the importance of the female role in both Indian and Jewish cultures, enjoying workshops on Challah braiding and discussing larger core values with another JSC fellow, the teacher. The youth group challenges themselves to raise money for an education fund, throwing the largest party of the community’s year during Hanukkah. All these people call each other family, and welcome all Jews into their shuls and their homes.

Indian Jews are small in number and mighty in spirit. They understand that they are shrinking and indeed spend much of their time discussing their diminishing community and concern about the future. But it is this sense of uncertainty that draws them closer together and it is this sense of unity that inspires the Jews of India to take care of one another. Like Jews anywhere else in the world, Jewish Indians come from a variety of socioeconomic, educational, and religious backgrounds. Some of these people live in poverty and need financial aid; some are middle-class but need a sense of community in the otherwise vast city; some are not knowledgeable about Jewish traditions and need a teacher. In my time in India, I saw an elderly woman who otherwise would have no home or caregiver singing Hebrew songs and dancing in Bayiti, the JDC-run Jewish old age home. I saw a five-year-old boy questioning why we say the Shema, and receiving wise and varying answers from his elders. I saw
a young man excited to make Aliyah finding a group of peers in which he felt comfortable expressing his hesitation, and receiving love and support in return.

I was also lucky enough to serve with a Jewish organization called Gabriel Project Mumbai (GPM), a partner of JDC’s that provides food and education to slum children, and work for slum women who prepare the meals for 800 schoolchildren every day. Founded on the belief that the Jewish people have an obligation to help vulnerable and needy populations, GPM attracts both international Jewish volunteers and local Indian Jews to educate, motivate, and care for children living in Mumbai's slums. Although the tremendous and striking poverty of India’s poorest residents is prominent in an outsider's experience of the country, many Indians largely ignore the issue, regarding it as either unsolvable or the people as unfixable. However, wonderful Indian nonprofit organizations such as REAP are committed to providing opportunities for children in the slums to have a better life and the Jewish community is also rising to the challenge and becoming involved in GPM. They feel a need to engage in their country’s future and created an internship program in which young Jewish Indian interns take on a leadership role in combating poverty.

Indian Jews have a tremendous capacity for love and acceptance. Though they have never experienced direct anti Semitism from their fellow Indian citizens, their devotion to a global Jewish world dictates that they feel each blow to a foreign Jewish community as if it were their own because to them it is. This is why the youth have the ability to feel empathy and compassion for children in the slums. Indian youth have been taught by their elders to align heartbeats with the entirety of the Jewish population; the slum children are simply another needy population. A teenage intern in the GPM program will spend weeks planning an outing for the children. They ensure an educational yet exciting lesson plan, taking them to the aquarium to learn about sea life or a sports field to play with equipment otherwise unattainable. And they care for the children, serving them lunch before taking their own, helping them use a toilet for the first time, wiping mucus from their nostrils.

Years ago, when I first began to travel alone, my mother gave me a piece of advice her mother had given her. She said that if I ever found myself in any kind of trouble, in a situation I couldn’t handle or in need of help, all I had to do was find the nearest synagogue. Jews, she said, stick together. I’ve traveled to many countries, lived in new communities, and met many foreign Jews. This sentiment always seemed to be present and palpable. But the Indian Jewish community takes it to a new level—they care wholeheartedly and undyingly for their fellow Jews, taking them in when necessary, lending a hand when able and always feeling responsible for and connected to Jews worldwide. It’s for this reason that in a country so immense, with a relatively miniscule cluster, the Indian Jews were able to create something so powerful.

Though I’m not reminded of my experience in India on a daily basis, it is impossible to forget what my time in the community there taught me. Every day I challenge myself to connect and love as globally, as fiercely, and as deeply as my Indian Jewish community did. And I know that even across the oceans, I am still a part of their Jewish experience and family.
Leah’s story is an example of one way to make a difference in the lives of India’s Jewish community. There are a number of opportunities to explore India and work with the Jewish community there through JDC Entwine — the young adult movement of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC):

The JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corps (JSC) is a year-long, paid opportunity for Jewish young professionals to volunteer overseas with JDC. Responding to international Jewish and humanitarian needs, JSC fellows facilitate and create innovative programs using their unique skills and talents. In India, JDC’s JSC fellows lead and develop programming for all ages at the JDC-supported Evelyn Peters Jewish Community Center in Mumbai, including serving as an advisor with the Jewish Youth Pioneers, the community’s local Jewish youth group.

More at www.jdcentwine.org/jsc
The JDC Multi-Week Jewish Service Corps offers 6-8 week placements for young Jews looking to make a difference in communities around the world. In India, Multi-Week JSC fellows work with JDC’s partner Gabriel Project Mumbai, a humanitarian organization committed to addressing poverty, hunger and illiteracy in Mumbai slums. Multi-Week JSC Fellows work alongside peers from Mumbai’s Jewish community, creating dynamic programs to empower and educate children living in slums while developing lifelong connections to Jewish young adults in India.

More at www.jdczentwine.org/jsc-multiweek

Awarded to one person annually, JDC’s Ralph I. Goldman (RIG) Fellowship in International Jewish Service is a one-of-a-kind leadership experience. With senior JDC staff, RIG Fellows design unique overseas placements shaped by their skills, interests and critical needs of communities abroad, including India.

Applications for the 2015 Fellow are open through May 30: www.jdczentwine.org/ralph