The Beauty of Traversing Cochin

Paradesi Synagogue, Cochin
It was a quiescent, misty day in the early part of June. I had just arrived in Fort Cochin in the southwest Indian state of Kerala. The very recent onset of the monsoon season here had rendered this popular, centuries-old tourist destination a more peaceful, unperturbed shell of what it had been just a month or two earlier. Wet and lazy afternoons were the norm during my time in a part of India universally known as ‘G-d’s Own Country’ and for good reason. It’s not just because of the incredible natural beauty of its tropic landscape or the indelible charm and happiness of its people, both of which hold true in every respect. I found the label ‘G-d’s Own Country’ to be fitting for another reason, a reason that puts almost two-thousand years of Jewish life and experience into context.

As a part of my own research at the time on Hindu-Jewish relations, it became an imperative to visit the location of India’s oldest existing Jewish community in Cochin, Kerala. With records of Jewish settlement dating back shortly after the fall of the second Temple in 70 CE and other ancient sources claiming dates that precede this by hundreds of years, the Jewish community that would eventually settle in Cochin would have a societal and historical experience unlike almost any other Jews. It is an experience immortalized in the sites that I perceived as I made my way to the section of this city known as ‘Jew Town’.

I traversed the town along paths aptly named ‘Jew Street’, ‘Jew Town Road’ and ‘Synagogue Lane’. The opulent smells of cinnamon, vanilla and nutmeg fill the air in this land known and coveted for centuries due to the abundance of exotic spices that grow here. Among these Judaic-inspired streets, complete with symbols of six-pointed stars, Hebrew characters and even a Jewish cemetery, is its center-piece— the Paradesi Synagogue. This synagogue, built in the 16th century by persecuted Jews originally fleeing the Inquisition, is the highlight of Jewish existence here and one of the few remaining memories of this once thriving community which stands at less than ten today.

I wandered the area thinking about the unbelievable history and experience of the Jews of Cochin who, unlike most Jewish communities in the world today, were able to live and flourish for two-thousand years without threat of persecution by their Indian rulers. As I put this into perspective, trying to take in this undeniably unique experience in the story of the Jewish people, I became keenly aware of something that, despite all my studies, knowledge
and experience regarding India and its Jews, had never really been apparent to me. The synagogue and the rest of ‘Jew Town’ sat immersed in a pluralistic society of people representing many of the world’s great religions. Mosques, Protestant and Catholic Churches, Jain and Hindu Temples: they were all here, they were all co-existing peacefully. For centuries the Jewish people lived and flourished in this community without issue or conflict. They interacted, traded, and befriended the people of all these great faiths. In return they were befriended, they were respected and they were protected by their neighbors, rulers and friends.

I paused for a moment to take it all in. This is a place where a Jewish cemetery shares a common wall with a neighboring Hindu temple. It is a place where a Muslim man invites me, a stranger, foreigner and Jew, into his home for tea with his family as a sheer gesture of kindness and hospitality. This is a place where the plurality of religions and G-d’s peoples had become a boon to the Jewish community. It is this historical experience of the Jewish people, the unprecedented integration and success of its pluralistic religious society, and my own contemporary experience in Cochin that makes this place unique, not just for the Jewish community and its people, but for the world as a whole. For nowhere else have so many of G-d’s people and G-d’s different communities lived together for so long in such harmony. It was then that I knew that this truly was ‘G-d’s Own Country’.

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