Life, Vision, and Persistence in Jew Town
We went to Cochin without a plan, as this is often how the best trips unfold. There were so many unanswered questions: What does Jewish life look like in Cochin in India and its “Jew Town”? Is there any contemporary Jewish life there? How did the Jews there celebrate sukkot (which is when we were there)? How would we celebrate sukkot? Were we permitted to visit the Paradesi Synagogue? Would we be able to attend services? My internet searched yielded more questions than answers. “Surrender” I kept telling myself as these questions elicited ambiguous responses from numerous sources. For my husband, Josh, though attending services was a priority for him – his consistent, steadfast belief was unshaken. He simply stated, “G-d will provide.”

We turned the corner in the quiet streets, and then Josh, like a child seeing snow for the first time, zealously pointed at that yellow flag. He powerfully shouted: “Chabad!” I echoed his excitement by shouting twice and throwing up my hands: “Chaaaaabadd!”

We had already settled ourselves with delicious dosas (traditional Indian pancakes made from rice and lentils), walking back towards our hotel when first we spotted Chabad. The center was not listed on the internet. Prior to that point, the possibility of attending services seemed dim, yet we wanted to acknowledge the festival’s existence and find some way to celebrate it here. We had resolved to walk to the synagogue in the morning and hope for the best. Turning that corner not only highlighted a current, Jewish presence but also altered the trajectory of our trip and the chag in magical ways.

Walking up to Chabad’s door, we suddenly felt giddy, as if we were walking into Willy Wonka’s Spiritual Chocolate Factory. Once inside, we could smell Israeli dishes. We were transported momentarily to someplace very familiar in our Jewish past. We walked through the house and joined the rabbi, his wife, Indian Jews, and Israelis sitting in the sukkah, speaking Hebrew, laughing, eating, living Judaism. With the moonlight fighting to reach us in the sukkah, we felt both apart of and removed from the world. “Welcome!” Rabbi Bernstein’s huge smile said to us; his jet-black beard enveloping that smile. Sharing only a few words saved for introduction, we began praying with them; prayer seemed a more powerful connection than, “Hi, I’m Allison. I am…”
Those precious moments together praying and laughing color the current Jewish life and energy that is often neglected in articles and books, which describe Jew Town as a dying community with little present and no future to speak of. As with many other such centers in pockets of the world, though small, this one represents life, vision, and persistence. Practically, though, it represented an opportunity to sit in a sukkah, use a lulav and etrog, and have Shabbat dinner with fellow travelers.

The walk from the Chabad, with the rabbi and rebbetzin, to the synagogue for sukkot, surely is not described in any guidebook. The next morning we made this walk with them, along with a handful of secular Israelis and Indian Jews donned in saris and Indian garb. With goats crossing the street, tuk tuks sputtering away, women carrying gallons of water on their heads, children playing cricket, and strong, sweet smells of ginger and black pepper pervading the air, I could not pinpoint exactly where we were in my mind. Yet, I knew we were where we needed to be, and my heart danced all the way to the synagogue that morning.

Arriving at near-forgotten synagogues around the world, it sometimes feels like stumbling upon an exciting yet sad secret. In the mingling of these contrasts, there is a peaceful space found when an individual experiences a synagogue.

The Paradesi Synagogue is a stunning, Sephardic structure full of bold colors and intense suggestions of the past. Its secrecy lies in its current life presence. Most visitors, escorted by guides, are unable to attend services, and view the synagogue as a museum. This inevitably creates a distance between the visitor and the structure’s current vitality. Once we arrived at the synagogue and took off our shoes—this is India—we sat hoping that other Jews would attend. With nine men present that morning, the possibility of obtaining a minyan seemed bleak; this was not Jerusalem or Manhattan. With
only a handful of Jews living close by, and most already in attendance, the men thought to walk to a congregation’s home and ask whether his health would allow him to participate. He arrived twenty minutes later in a wheelchair. With his wife pushing him, this man—who looked at least 85 years old—sacrificed his own rest for the collective, something that has fed his soul his entire life according to friends and neighbors. Watching him pray in shul, I smile and tear up at the same time: I am watching the union between Chabad’s injecting life into the community and the community’s existing vitality.

After services, Josh and I walk freely around the town and see remnants of Jewish past and wonder just how alive Judaism is outside of Chabad and the Paradesi Synagogue. There is an exhilaration and sadness to this questioning. Stars of David, unused synagogues, various suggestions of once-Jewish homes, spice stores bearing “Jew” in its name are present in the town. When I see a Star of David or unused synagogue, the Jews of the past here come alive. I watch their souls flavor the current Jewish life in Cochin, and converse with the Jews still present.

Traveling to Jew Town reinforced my belief in the unshakeable, spiritual commitment and resiliency of our people. Experiencing the Indian man completing the minyan in his wheelchair reinforced that Jewish life transcends culture and age and ignores crumbling physical structures: our religion is not about physical representation but rather spiritual dedication—persisting in the face of adversity, manifesting Jewish values, holding on to tradition, and evolving both individually and collectively.

Leaving Cochin, I sit on the plane, close my eyes, and feel grateful for our experience. I settle on acceptance: The mystery of our existence and the persistence in maintaining it is alive, colorful, and complex. So too are the Jews of Cochin.