A Unique Pessah Experience—in India

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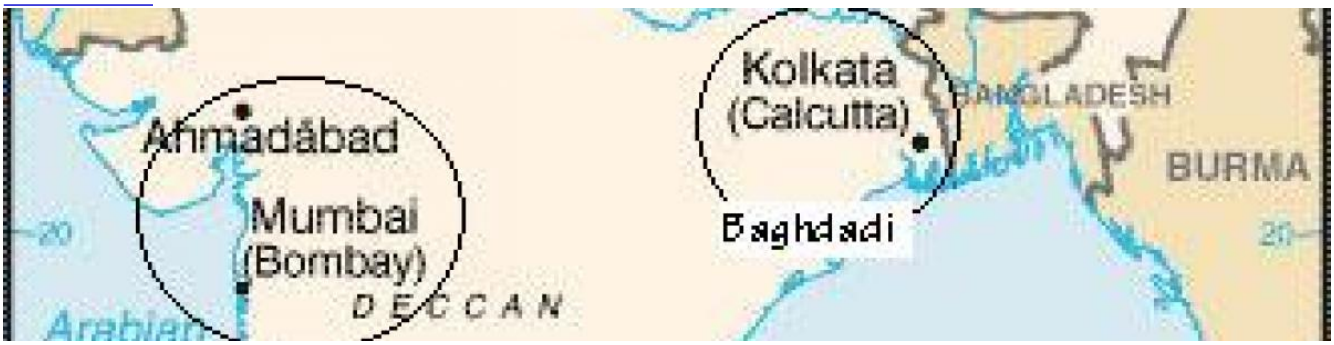

Keith Flaks is originally from Brooklyn, attended MTA, Yeshivat Hakotel, and Bar Ilan University. He has been teaching at Yeshivat Orayta for a number of years.

Several years ago, for Pessah, I visited the "lost tribe of Ephraim" in Southern India.
For more info about them check out this helpful wikipedia article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bene_Ephraim

This clan of about 150 people claim to be descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. They practice Jewish traditions, celebrate most of the holidays, and have started to practice many Mitzvot, often in their unique style!

For example, in their tradition, on Erev Pessah they slaughter a goat and put the blood on their doorposts! They were shocked to discover that most of the Jewish world doesn't do that! In general they were thrilled to learn more about how "mainstream Judaism" is being practiced in the rest of the world. Many even dream of a day when they could move to the holy land of Israel.

While I came to help lead Seder, I ended up learning much from our Indian experience! Here are a few lessons and highlights!

Lesson #1 The Power of Music

About 10 minutes after our arrival at the South Indian village in Chebrolu, I realized we had a problem. They don’t speak English!! OK, so we had a translator, and a few spoke English, but in general, how were we supposed to share the depth of our Torah traditions…when they can’t understand us?

The answer of course…was through the magic of music.

Music is the language which can break down all barriers, and so, during the seder, during kabbalat Shabbat, before during and after shiurim…we made sure to sing and dance…a lot.
Reb Shlomo Carlebach teaches that in the end of days, music will be the vehicle to bring the world back to the knowledge of God!

One night, after a long class with the villagers, 4 youthful Indian friends escorted us back to the hotel. (After 5 nights of bucket showers in 120 degree weather, and “natural” bathrooms, we had decided to splurge on an Indian hotel for the last nights of our stay.)

Our late night voyages was sweet, the weather was cooler, and the roads were slightly less chaotic. But as our translator wasn’t there, we sat silently together in the car.
Until one Indian boy, with a big smile on his face asked “Rav Keith… you know “Shabcheey”? And of course I did. And suddenly the Indian roads, with temples, churches and mosques on all sides, were filled with 6 souls singing every Jewish song we could think! We sang, Am Yisrael Chai, Kol Haolam Koolo and even Hatikvah at the top of our lungs. My wife and I were in shock, but they knew every word. It truly was a night we will not forget!

Lesson #2: The Power of Sincerity

After each night of Q and A, we would stand up to fulfill the Mitzvah of counting the Omer.
I had explained to them the details of how this Halakha was carried out, and sprinkled in some of its spiritual significance. After counting the Omer, I still felt, that we were missing something. I wasn’t ready to end the class.

And so I added on a new tradition: a Chassidic-Telugu blend. After the counting, we would add on 3 minutes of silent prayer. As most of the Telugi could not read Hebrew, formal texts were hard for them to grasp, but personal prayer…that was something that these people truly excelled at!

After two minutes of prayer, I sneakily opened my eyes, to see how everyone was doing. Soon my eyes were in tears. Perhaps they were praying for a job, or for their sister to find a suitable marriage match, or maybe they were praying to one day come to Jerusalem, but whatever it was, they were all completely immersed in sincere Tefillah.

And I kept thinking to myself…imagine if we had this type of sincerity in our communities' prayer services!

OK, so we may have some of the rituals down…but if we could only incorporate these peoples' sincerity into our Mitzvot, what a different Judaism we would have!

Lesson # 3 The Power of Thanks

In Hebrew, India is called “Hodu”. Hodu means to thank. At first, I was convinced, that the meaning of this was: “India has truly made me thankful and appreciative that… I don’t live in India!!!”

For example:
Thank God, I have a normal shower that doesn’t consist of a bucket of lukewarm water!
Thank God, I can walk across the street in Jerusalem without almost being run over by a motorbike, a beggar and a cow!
Thank God, I have enough money to afford basic medical needs, like asthma containers.
Thank God, I don’t have to live in a place so hot that one is forced to hibernate from 10am to 5 pm, and thank God I’m not stuck working in those conditions just to eke out 5 dollars a day, to support my family.

I truly felt blessed and thankful that I have been born into such a life of relative luxury.

And yet, as our Indian journey continued, my wife and I realized that there may be a totally different way of understanding why India is called Hodu. Ironically these people actually walked around and gave thanks far more than their richer Westernized counterparts. Virtually everyone in India has a religion. And virtually everyone makes a time for prayer, and thankfulness in their lives. Ironically, the ones who seem to have the most to be thankful for, are the ones who are most negligent of this basic obligation.

And so, India has come to symbolize the land of thankfulness, as it reminds me of my obligation, of the privilege to say thanks…even when life is tough.

So thank you Hashem, for giving me the amazing privilege of learning from these "Telugu Jews", and I hope that readers of this essay have learned something too!