

Interview

by Susan Blumberg-Kason



On Mangoes, Bollywood and Water Buffalo

Interview with Jenny Feldon

Photo credit: Rachel LaBrucherie

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Congratulations on the publication of your memoir, *Karma Gone Bad: How I Learned to Love Mangoes, Bollywood, and Water Buffalo* (Sourcebooks, 2013)! It's one of the most honest memoirs about moving abroad in recent years. Culture shock plays a huge part in your story, in which you move to Hyderabad, India for your husband's job. What was the toughest adjustment in Hyderabad?

Jenny Feldon (JF): Thank you so much! The toughest adjustment was going from a very full, very independent life in New York to a very lonely, isolated one in Hyderabad. I never thought I'd miss the subway so much, but I longed for it every day (even though my driver, Venkat, became one of the dearest friends I made in India.) My husband worked long hours and I was on my own a lot. Nothing in Hyderabad was the way I'd expected it to be, and my loneliness overshadowed everything, making me blind to anything but my own misery and the "otherness" of my new life. Add that to overwhelming culture shock and it was a recipe for disaster in the beginning.

AJL: Hyderabad is not one of the more popular Asian expat spots, such as Hong Kong, Tokyo or Singapore. What is the best piece of advice you would give to someone who is about to move overseas to a remote place like Hyderabad?

JF: Talk to someone who lives there, preferably an expat who will know how to explain what to expect and who can give you some basic survival strategies. Living this kind of life starts and ends with attitude, but realistic expectations go a LONG way toward having a positive outlook and giving the expat life the best you have to offer. We had virtually no information on Hyderabad before we arrived. Cultural customs

and expectations were so very different, especially in a city that was 70% Muslim. And there were things you just couldn't get in Hyderabad that were readily available in other parts of India, like tampons and cold medicine and peanut butter. Someone we knew who had visited Hyderabad shortly before we moved was the first person to give me hints about what life there was really going to be like. He told me there were cows and buffaloes in the road, and I just laughed. I should have listened and asked a lot more questions!

AJL: It seems as if you and your husband were just thrown into this new life with very little preparation. Do you think employers need to take a more active role in priming employees and their spouses for the changes they will experience abroad?

JF: Yes! Our experience would have been completely different if we'd been better prepared and supported by my husband's employer. Other companies send their expats into fully equipped situations, complete with furnished apartments, gas, electricity, phone lines, a driver and a bank account. We had to set up a household completely on our own once we left temporary housing and we had no idea how to do any of it. The red tape in India for Western expats can be really overwhelming. Also, some real training on the realities of expat life and on navigating a marriage through an international assignment would have gone a long way. We had no idea what we were getting into, and there are real challenges to overcome for someone working abroad with an "accompanying spouse," as they always referred to me. Setting up new expats with a mentor couple or family would have been incredibly helpful, as would providing more resources for networking, as well

as for navigating and understanding the new culture.

AJL: You write about being Jewish in Hyderabad. At first you keep a low profile about your Judaism because Hyderabad has a sizeable Muslim population. But then you realize that people there don't have a concept of what it means to be Jewish. They view you more as American or white than Jewish. Did your experience in a place with few Jews change your perception of what it means to be Jewish? Do you find that you are now more observant than before you went to India?

JF: I never realized how much of my identity was entwined with being Jewish until we moved to India. It was like a whole part of my life had just evaporated. There was no temple to go to, no Passover seders to plan or attend. I've always identified as a Jew more culturally than religiously, and that really hit home when we lived in Hyderabad. Toward the end of our stay, a Jewish family moved in to our development and it was just the best feeling to have Shabbat dinners together. Visiting the synagogue in Kerala was one of the most powerful experiences I had in India. After so many months of being removed from any kind of Jewish life, suddenly we were still right in the middle of India, but immersed again in a religion that really did transcend continents and cultures. I felt I like I was stepping back inside something so real and true, something so much bigger than myself. I loved being able to see India and Judaism intersect in that way.

AJL: Your descriptions of the caste system in India are fascinating. You also experienced a sort of caste system in your small expat community! It seemed very disconcerting. But do you think it prepared you well for a life in Los Angeles,

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where you and your family now live? To an outsider, LA seems like a large-scale version of your hotel weekend brunches in Hyderabad!

JF: Ha! I love it... LA definitely has its own sorting system... I'd never thought about it like that before! India taught me how to be more flexible, to not let labels and expectations get in the way of my experiences or my relationships. If I could go back and do it all again, I'd walk into those brunches with my head held high and introduce myself to every single person there. LA is a big place and just like Hyderabad, it's easy to get lost in the confusion and vastness of it all. If I'd focused on being true to myself and taking everything in without judgment or fear when we first arrived in India, things might have turned out differently. When we moved back to the US, I promised myself I'd never let judgments or expectations stand in the way of my happiness again. So we got here, and I tried to stay focused on gratitude, and being true to myself. As a result, I've found the most incredible people, the most blessed life in a city I never thought I'd call home... and I'm grateful for it every day.

AJL: Your memoir ends when you are about to move back to the United States. Did you experience reverse culture shock upon your return? What was the most difficult thing to readjust to?

JF: The quiet! I'll never forget driving on the highway on the way home from the airport and being astounded at how silent everything seemed. All those horns honking 24 hours a day had embedded themselves into my subconscious, and without them I felt like I was walking around underwater. Driving a car again after so many years (first in New York, when I took the subway or cabs everywhere and then in Hyderabad,



Photo credit: Shannon West

where I had a driver) was a really big adjustment, especially living in LA, where you have to drive EVERYWHERE. And I'll never get used to pomegranates not being in season year round! I had one every single morning in India and they're my absolute favorite fruit. I miss them so much!

AJL: A big difference between your life in India and your new one in Los Angeles is that you are now a mother! Do you talk to your children about India? If so, do you feel a need to connect that life with this one through teaching your children about Indian culture?

JF: India is such a huge part of my life and who I am now. We probably talk about India at least once every single day. My children are fascinated with India, and my daughter, who is almost six, is begging to go visit. We have souvenirs from our travels all over the house — bedding, furniture, artwork. We take off our shoes at the door, which my kids know is a custom we learned in India. I can't wait to take them there someday, and show them a little of the magic and beauty of the country that truly changed their parents' lives. Also, we have a large collection of Ganeshes...my daughter may be the only kid ever to show up to the first day of religious school at our synagogue with a tiny brass Ganesh

idol as a transitional object! She carries him with her everywhere. Luckily her teachers were really understanding.

AJL: Before you left New York for India, you blogged about your life in Manhattan. This blog continued during your time in Hyderabad. Can you discuss how it developed into a book?

JF: I always knew that I'd want to write about my experience in India — writing is not only my true passion in life, but one of the most important ways I connect to other people and make sense of the world around me. What I didn't realize was how rocky my journey would be or how profoundly it would change my life. It took me several years to process and understand that journey, to look at it as objectively as possible and to find the words to express it all. The blog I kept while I was in India was invaluable — I can go back and read what I was feeling, in my own words and in those raw, unfiltered moments.

AJL: In *Karma Gone Bad*, you talk about a novel you hoped to finish in India. Do you plan to write more non-fiction or will you return to that novel or other fiction? And do you think India will figure into your future work?

JF: India is a huge part of who I am now, so I'm fairly certain elements of it will be present in everything I write! But for now, I'm taking a break from memoir. Fiction is my first love, and I really want to publish a novel someday. I do, however, have the sequel to *Karma Gone Bad* tossing around in my mind... I returned to the US pregnant with my daughter, and then my husband went back to India for a year shortly after she was born. Our story didn't end when the book does, and I'd love to pick up where I left off and share more of our adventures, and how India continues to shape our journey. ✨