When I sat down to try to write a short reflection piece about my year in Mumbai as a JDC Jewish Service Corps (JSC) volunteer, I shuddered slightly. The thought of condensing everything I learned there, along with the deep personal connection I developed with members of the Indian-Jewish community, seemed impossible. Being in this line of work, I often found myself explaining what it's like to be a foreign volunteer entering a community in a country you barely know and getting a ‘job done’ in a cultural setting that is so very different from yours. It requires an acute sense of adventure, fearlessness in the face of the unknown, adaptation, and the willingness to accept that the truths you grew up with turn out to be completely wrong. You also need the ability to laugh at yourself and discover that sometimes there is a clear right and wrong which transcends cultural and moral ambiguities. Most important, you need to be able to listen closely, relate to and genuinely empathize with different kinds of people, each one with an entirely different set of experiences.

Once I really sat down to write this piece, though, one thought kept recurring, and it wasn’t how adventurous India had made me. It was how after twelve months in Mumbai, I felt like I moved to India to become more Jewish.

The JSC volunteers’ job in the community is not quite 24/7, but it is pretty close. We work full time and go to all the evening and weekend community events: weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, Brits, funerals, and the unique Indian-Jewish custom of Malida, which happens, to quote an Indian Jew, “whenever something is fulfilled”, such as (happy) life cycle events, a synagogue anniversary, buying a new house, healing after a prolonged illness, etc.

Most of our office time is spent planning informal Jewish education sessions for a wide variety of ages, or organizing major and minor events of the Jewish calendar. On Sundays, when members of the community come to the JCC we teach the kids and the teenagers in the morning, while the afternoon is dedicated to spending time with the youth either in a formal session or just hanging out. We also teach adult
Jewish education classes on weekday evenings, plan camps and, somehow, manage to have friends.

And that community — with a completely different history, which belongs to a country with a decidedly non-Western culture — obviously has traditions, customs and spiritual approaches that are a product of its own experience and evolution. Working in India, a country where religious identity is deeply tied into all the other aspects of identity, one of the oldest “native” Jewish Diaspora communities, has taught me that being Jewish goes beyond saying the same prayers and following the same holidays. It’s about living a life that places importance on certain ideals, like community (especially when the community is small), and celebrations centered and transcending a moment in an individuals’ life. It’s about transmitting specific values, from parent to child, and incorporating those values and ideas into one’s daily life.

This experience was so intense because I was living and breathing Judaism like never before. I faced the dawning realization that my ideas and notions about Judaism, which I thought were pretty broad to begin with, fit into a small box that had little–to no room for anything different. So I began reassessing what it means to be Jewish. I thought about it through India’s warm “winter” months, while attending Sunday weddings and planning Hanukah events. I thought about it as it began to get hotter and more humid, and as the community (and Mumbai) already felt like home.

Indian Jews are barely distinguishable from non-Jews in their country of residence. The only real, substantial difference is their deeply Jewish approach to life, and a genuine and profound connection to Israel, which is, of course, what they share with many other Jews around the world. So many things I thought were common to all (Western, I now add) Jews ended up being the influence of other Western religions and Western thought in general.

It turns out that we’re often wrong about the things we place importance on. The specific kinds of dishes for Shabbat dinner matter less than whether or not it was cooked with love and the intention of sharing it with one’s family. Passover rituals vary from tradition to tradition, and are certainly different in India, but what is universal is the spirit of passing on a beautiful message of freedom. Prayers in the synagogue are always dense and usually hard to follow (in Mumbai it was even harder...
since most of the siddurim are in Marathi – the local language – transliterated from Hebrew), but the fervor and strength of the prayers are always present.

Every Indian-Jewish experience I had was genuine in its intention. Joy and faith were palpable on festivals, as was the thrill of a community reunion. I think of High Holidays spent in prayer with the community, Simchat Torah dancing, weddings, Mendhis (ceremony where henna is applied), and Malidas in the synagogue courtyard, lights hanging across the night sky, the stage brightly decorated, people dressed up, celebrating together, eating, talking, being with each other after a long time apart.

And while it is practically identical to what I’ve seen and experienced with other Jewish communities in the U.S., France, Spain, Mexico, and Canada, at the same time it is different, entirely its own way of being, simultaneously so Indian and so Jewish. The uniqueness may lie in the community’s alternative history; it may be the result of the mixture of Indian culture and religions and Judaism; or it might be the distinctive spirit of this community, so small and apparently isolated, united like a large family, with its feuds and arguments and deep, underlying love, strong and persistent throughout the centuries.

Being a volunteer in India has been a long, continuous lesson on how to make a box expand and grow and take on a new form. I understand my tradition and faith better now, and I can clearly identify, in all its complexity, the intricate relationship between spirituality and community. The Indian-Jewish community has taught me that. It was truly a wonderful community to be welcomed into. 

Jeanine Buzali grew up in Mexico and Israel, and went to college in the United States. She served as the JDC Jewish Service Corps Volunteer in Mumbai, India in 2009-2010.

About the JDC

The Jewish Service Corps (JSC) is a project of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Through the JSC, JDC offers young Jews the opportunity to directly engage with JDC’s global mission and actively fulfill the value of Jewish responsibility through a meaningful service opportunity abroad. For additional information, please contact the JDC at globalservice@jdc.org or visit www.jdc.org/jsc