

Barefoot and Jewish in Tirupati

Tirupati is home to one of South India's holiest sites, the Sri Venkateswara Temple. This famous temple sits on top of a hill called Tirumala, which is one of seven important peaks in the area, and one of the richest pilgrim centers in the world. Every day, between 50,000-100,000 Hindu pilgrims visit this site to take darshan. To take, or receive darshan is literally to see and connect with something divine, like the image of their deity, or a great spiritual leader or guru. In the case of the Sri Venkateswara Temple, to take darshan is to see the idol of the temple's presiding deity, Lord Venkateswara, who

is believed by followers to be a merciful and benevolent form of the Hindu god, Vishnu. Lord Venkateswara is known as a wish fulfiller, and pilgrims journeying to Tirumala come either to make a wish or to give thanks for one that was granted. He is also known by the names Balaji, Govinda, and Srinivasa—names that you can hear people chanting, yelling, and mumbling everywhere you go in Tirupati.

I was living in India at the time as part of a nine-month MASA program called LIFE (Leadership International Fellowship Experience) that focuses on leadership development and social

change. The first half of the program is based in Hyderabad, India, and the second half in Jerusalem, Israel. While on the program, participants do tailor-made, meaningful internships related to social change or justice in each location. While in India, I interned with Aide et Action (an international development organization that works on issues related to education). I spent my days in the field photographing and conducting interviews with the children, mothers, and teachers served by the organization.

Working five days a week left little time to explore India outside of Hyderabad,

so when a travel agent friend of mine named Azeem suggested that I visit the Hindu pilgrimage city of Tirupati, I agreed immediately. (A decision augmented by some internet research.)

I grew up “culturally Jewish,” never having much of a Jewish identity, or feeling very connected to the spiritual or ritualistic side of the religion. But I am fascinated by those who do. I was curious to explore Tirupati not only because it looked beautiful, but also because I was searching for something in my own religious identity.

Azeem had mentioned that there were two ways to get to the temple: one was to walk up the mountain, and the other, which he recommended, was to take a shuttle up to the top. This was a recommendation I heard again and again from people; every time I asked someone how long it takes to walk, the time seemed to get longer and longer. Some people said two hours, while others said at least five—“just take the bus.” Never!

I was up early the next morning, ready for my two-to-five hour hike to see the Sri Venkateswara temple. A man at the front desk of the hostel said that I should tell a rickshaw driver to take me to Alipiri. Upon arrival, I learned that the pilgrim footpath to the Temple itself is called the Alipiri footpath, and is comprised of 3550 steps, spread out over 9 km.

“Where are you going?” my rickshaw driver called out to me. “You can’t wear shoes on the path!” I learned that if I wanted to walk the path, I would have to do it barefoot. With no idea whether I’d be walking over rocks, or through dirt and garbage, I threw my sneakers in my backpack, took out my camera, waved to the rickshaw driver, and entered through the dark tunnel that led to the beginning of the Alipiri footpath.



Miriam Wasser in India

I exited the short tunnel into the sunlight. In front of me was one of the most gorgeous arrays of activities I have ever seen. At the base of a colorful staircase, a handful of people were marking the start of their pilgrimage with a puja. In Hinduism, a puja is a religious ritual or offering to a god or deity in order to receive their blessing in return. It is usually done at the beginning of a religious ceremony or right before entering a temple, but also often marks the start of a new venture. There are a lot ways an offering can be made, though many involve cracking a coconut, giving flowers, and applying colorful powders and pastes. I snapped a few photos of people cracking coconuts and lighting small fires from kurpuram (a white herb turned into a paste), and then began my ascent up the stairs.

I swooned over each and every step. All of my favorite colors—bright reds, oranges, and turmeric yellows—decorated the backs of the stairs, and covered figurines or other carvings and sculptures along the way. It seemed such a far cry from any Jewish synagogue or custom I was

aware of, as it was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I wondered if it was possible to die from a color-induced coma of happiness.

It wasn’t too long before I encountered two young girls touching the back of every step with a colorful paint. Through broken English, I was able to understand that many people who have had a prayer or a wish granted will travel to Tirumala, and will touch each and every one of the 3550 steps with a colorful powdered paint as a sign of gratitude.

Every few hundred feet, the path would pass through a small cluster of chaat, tea, and snack stands, and all along the way, tired pilgrims rested or napped. There were small temples in the forest that surrounded the path, and giant trees decorated with paints, flowers, and fabrics (which I later learned contained offerings or other tokens of thankfulness). A little while later I met two other girls who helped explain what was going on, and who took me under their wings for the remainder of the ascent.



About three-quarters of the way through, the path suddenly ended near a big gathering of people eating a rice dish. The two main acts of a Hindu pilgrimage, my friends explained, are darshan and prasadam. Prasadam is a gift—often a food—that is offered to a god or a deity, then “tasted” by the god, imbued with divine blessing, and then consumed by the pilgrim/devotee. The Laddu prasadam at Tirumala is world famous, and, in fact, is a patented recipe. As we dug into our holy lunch, I tried to think what in my cultural heritage could be

akin to all that I saw around me; the Judaism I grew up with seemed very bland in comparison.

Since being a teenager, I have struggled with what Judaism means to me, and those feelings surfaced again as I looked around—where were the flower garlands, the colorful paints, and the coconuts in my religion? I tried to re-center myself as we continued our ascent, reminding myself that sticking with the theme of the pilgrimage, I should concentrate on things I was thankful for throughout the day.

That quickly, however, became a bit more difficult. Up until this point in the day, my feet had been doing quite well. But shortly after the prasadam stop, the path cuts out and the walk continues along the highway for a kilometer or two. The path is mostly smooth stone, which my soft Western feet could handle, but the sandy, pebble-ridden stretch of highway was something else. Of course I could have put my shoes back on, but I had come this far, and was determined to complete the path barefoot. I fell behind my two friends, and like some wounded soldier in a war movie, told them that they could go on without me. But, as my self-appointed guides, they insisted on waiting.

Once we got off of the road, it was about another kilometer until we reached the final steps, where some people were climbing on their hands and knees. Like touching the back of the steps with paint, crawling up the final part of the Alipiri path is another way of showing gratitude to the divine for granting a wish.

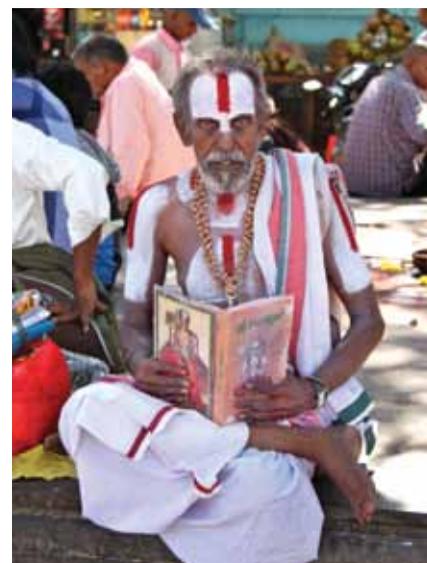
At the top step there were piles of powders, flowers, some rupees, and ashes from small fires. The girls gave a small prayer, put a pink tikka (a powdered religious mark) on my forehead, and we continued on to the Tirumala Temple Complex.

The Temple complex is truly a world unto itself. Thousands of people were praying, shopping, chatting with friends, eating, napping, and walking around. I followed my two friends, eventually giving in to my aching and roughed-up feet by putting on my shoes. We parted ways around 2 pm, since they wouldn’t finish preparing and receiving darshan for at least another eight or nine hours, and because of a bizarre hostel policy, I had to be back by 7 pm to reserve my room for another night. I spent the rest of the afternoon exploring and talking with people.

Crammed against the wall of the tightly packed shuttle bus, I watched the sun drop behind the mountains and thought about how I had left Hyderabad for something new, exciting, and beautiful. After soaking in all of the energy, colors, and spirituality of the day, I felt recharged in that magical way only traveling can foment. But I also felt a little jealous of the aesthetics of Hindu traditions; I couldn't silence that slight nagging feeling that Judaism just wasn't as beautiful.

Flash forward a week or two. I am sitting in a small hut made from patched tarpaulin and other found objects in India's second largest trash dump, listening to a woman talk about why she does not want to send her children to school. She needs them, she explains, to help sort through the municipal waste and collect scrap metals and plastics that can be sold to a local buyer. She is telling me that she comes from a long-line of "rag-pickers," (what they call those who scavenge trash for recyclables) and that no one in her family has gone to school; she just doesn't see the value in it. I was there interviewing her for my internship with Aide et Action.

If Tirupati was the most beautiful place I saw in India, this place was the worst. This woman and her community lived at the base of a man-made mountain of trash, where piles spontaneously erupt in burning flames, as methane and other gases heat up, mix with oxygen, and ignite. My eyes stung the whole day, and I could taste the smell of burning plastic, decaying vegetables, milk, soggy paper, and rotting meat. The sound of flies buzzing was the white noise behind the white smog. I stepped over tires, rags, soda cans, coconut shells, napkins, and decomposing mush on a tour of the mountain. Other details of the visit are too horrible to recount here, and I returned home that



evening shocked and depressed about what I had just experienced.

As I began the long task of processing my visit to the dump, I realized that what was equally as troubling as the environment was the near universal resistance to education I encountered that day. As I saw again and again through my fieldwork and office research, education is the only ticket out of the cycle of poverty. I was dismayed because it's one thing not to have access to a school, but it's another

not to send your children because you see no value in an education.

Before that field-visit, I'm not sure I grasped that there were people in the world who truly didn't see value in an education. Days like the one I spent with those rag-pickers are the sorts of experiences that can make one cynical, but, consistent with the emphasis of the LIFE program they can also be interpreted as a reaffirmation that the work you are doing is worthwhile and necessary; as rallying cries for social change.

Feature

by *Miriam Wasser*

Throughout my nine months on the LIFE program, I deepened my appreciation for the Jewish values I grew up with: tikkun olam (repairing the world), the importance of community and education, and the importance of exploring and asking tough questions.

After the four months in India, we lived in Jerusalem for another five, a time period in which I was exposed to Jewish customs and practices that seemed equally as foreign and interesting as the pujas in Tirupati.

A lot of people ask about the connection between India and Israel, and why our program is in both places. The simple answer is that Hyderabad and Jerusalem are both complex, hub cities of social innovation. But often I think we have

to be taken out of our comfort zone to explore something totally foreign in order to understand the things that seem most familiar and obvious to us, whether in the realm of culture, religion, or ethics.

I discovered a relationship to my own religion after visiting a place where there were no other Jews, and in fact, probably no other white foreigners. In Tirupati I wondered what it would be like to feel so deeply connected to a religion. It wasn't apparent to me until later on, when I was back in Hyderabad working at my internship, that this was exactly what I was doing. I was living my Judaism. As I climbed the Alipiri path, I thought about things I was thankful for—things like my family, my friends, and the privileges I have in life. After completing the LIFE program, with all that I learned

over those nine months, I can now add my Jewish values and community to the list. I don't look back at the trip to Tirupati with any sort of panging sensation anymore; I am part of a people with a deeply rooted value system to which I strongly relate and believe in. And I feel really good about that (though I wouldn't mind cracking a few coconuts and stringing up some garlands for a little aesthetic umpff...) 🙏

Miriam Wasser is a graduate of the LIFE (Leadership International Fellowship Experience) Program, and recently returned to the US after a year and a half of traveling and adventuring abroad. She graduated from Connecticut College in 2009, and blogs at inpursuitofthecolorful@wordpress.com