

MINT ON SUNDAY

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Notes from Jerusalem

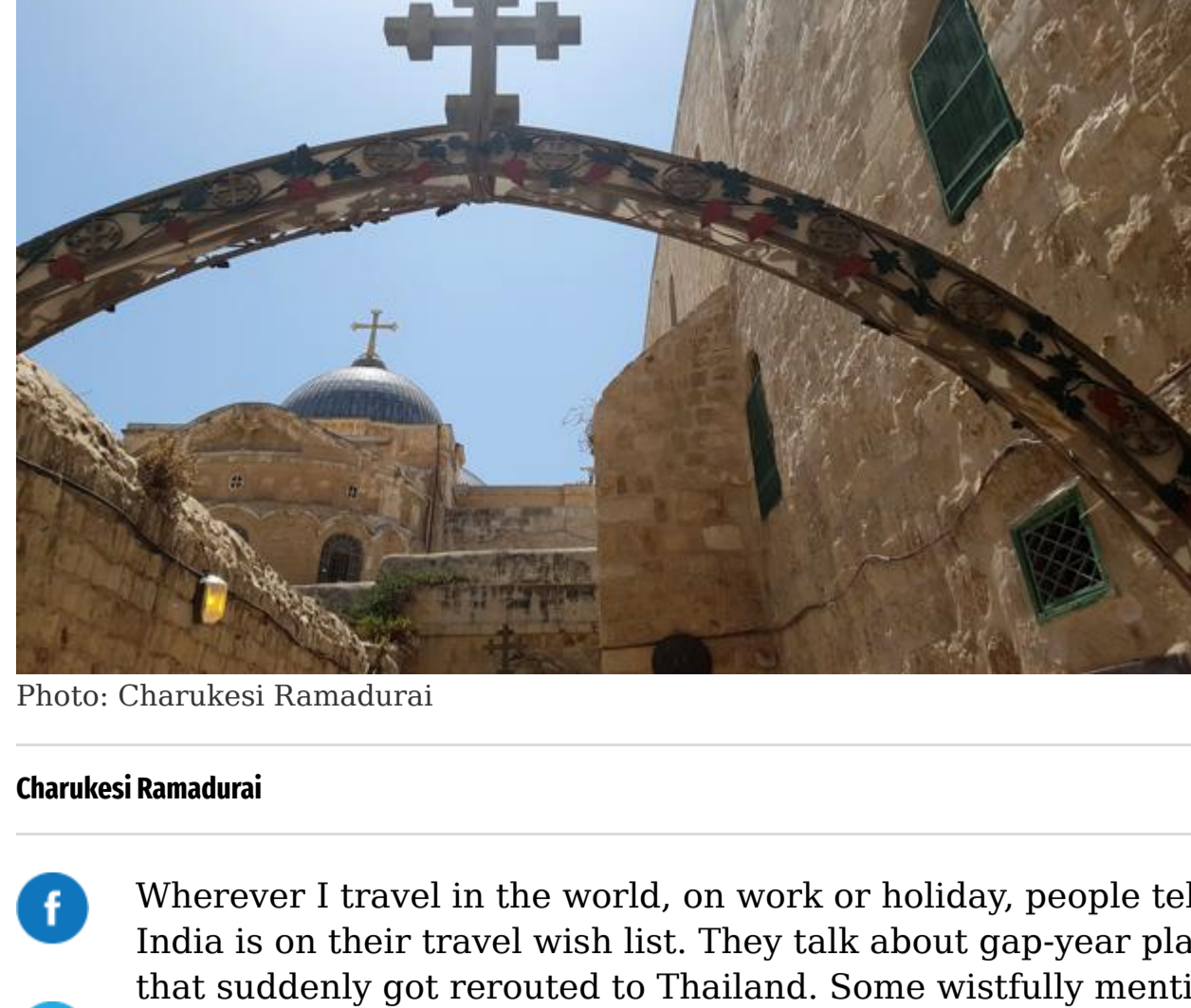


Photo: Charukesi Ramadurai

In the melting pot of cultures, religions and senses that is Jerusalem, the writer discovers chaos, order and something more

Charukesi Ramadurai

Wherever I travel in the world, on work or holiday, people tell me India is on their travel wish list. They talk about gap-year plans that suddenly got rerouted to Thailand. Some wistfully mention friends who spent nights under the open skies in Rajasthan, while others tentatively ask about violence against women in India. Is that all true?

A few bold ones exchange emails and promise to catch up when they arrive.

But in Israel, almost every other person I come across has already been to India. It works like this: finish high school, finish military service and fetch up in Goa/Manali/Puri/insert place where both hash and hotel rooms are cheap and plentiful.

Unlike, say, in Egypt or Russia, Israelis don't exclaim "Amitabh Bachchan!" or "Raj Kapoor!" upon seeing an Indian on the street. It's usually a broad smile, a thumbs-up and "India!" From the intricacies of nose-piercing to being an extra on a Bollywood set, I have had all manner of unexpected discussions with locals there.

Then a startling conversation in the northern city of Akko: it turns out that while the world (except a small portion which has been opposing her Israeli ethnicity) has been singing paeans to the superpowers of Wonder Woman Gal Gadot, Israeli women have been addicted to serials on Zee TV—the kind featuring scheming mothers-in-law in expensive silk saris and elaborate bindis.

At a street stall serving knafeh (a stringy, syrupy middle-eastern dessert), a woman stops to quiz me about these soap opera families. Are Indian *saas-bahus* really like that? What about my own mother-in-law?



Photo: Charukesi Ramadurai

Her teenage daughter rolls her eyes, in part embarrassment, part amusement. Her husband—who has clearly suffered through a few episodes—asks, "How does anybody watch these things? Bah, *balagan!*"

So it happens that the first Hebrew word I learn in Israel is *balagan*, slang for chaos or disorder. It is a word that everyone not just mouths with great glee, but also wears almost as a badge of honour.

Balagan is a flexible word, an overarching term that locals use to explain everything that feels wrong about Israeli culture and society, from the peace process (real or imaginary) in West Asia to traffic snarls (ditto) on Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard.

I discover much later that the Hebrew *balagan* is borrowed from Russian—in which it means much the same thing—the name for puppet show wagons seen in travelling fairs and carnivals in the days of yore. In one of those increasingly frequent moments of random internet surfing, I come across a video of actress Natalie Portman (who holds both US and Israeli citizenship) teaching interested viewers the top 10 Hebrew slang words (I did say random).

In that, she claims that the word's origin lies in "balcony" and "it is where you threw your old clothes and dirty rags and stuff, and it would be, like, a mess".

I am immediately charmed by a country that has a word like *balagan*, not as an excuse but as an explanation for the way it lives and works. Almost like our Indian "we are like that only".

The reason I am so fascinated with *balagan* is because of how much order there really is beneath the seeming chaos, a method to the apparent madness. Nowhere is this truer in all of Israel than in Jerusalem, that melting pot of cultures, religions and senses, in the midst of the 500-year-old stone walls.

Walking through the warren of narrow lanes in the walled city—blindly following my guide Ofer Moghadam, a Jerusalem local who seemed to know every ancient stone of his city by sight—I am sure I would never be able to find my way out by myself.

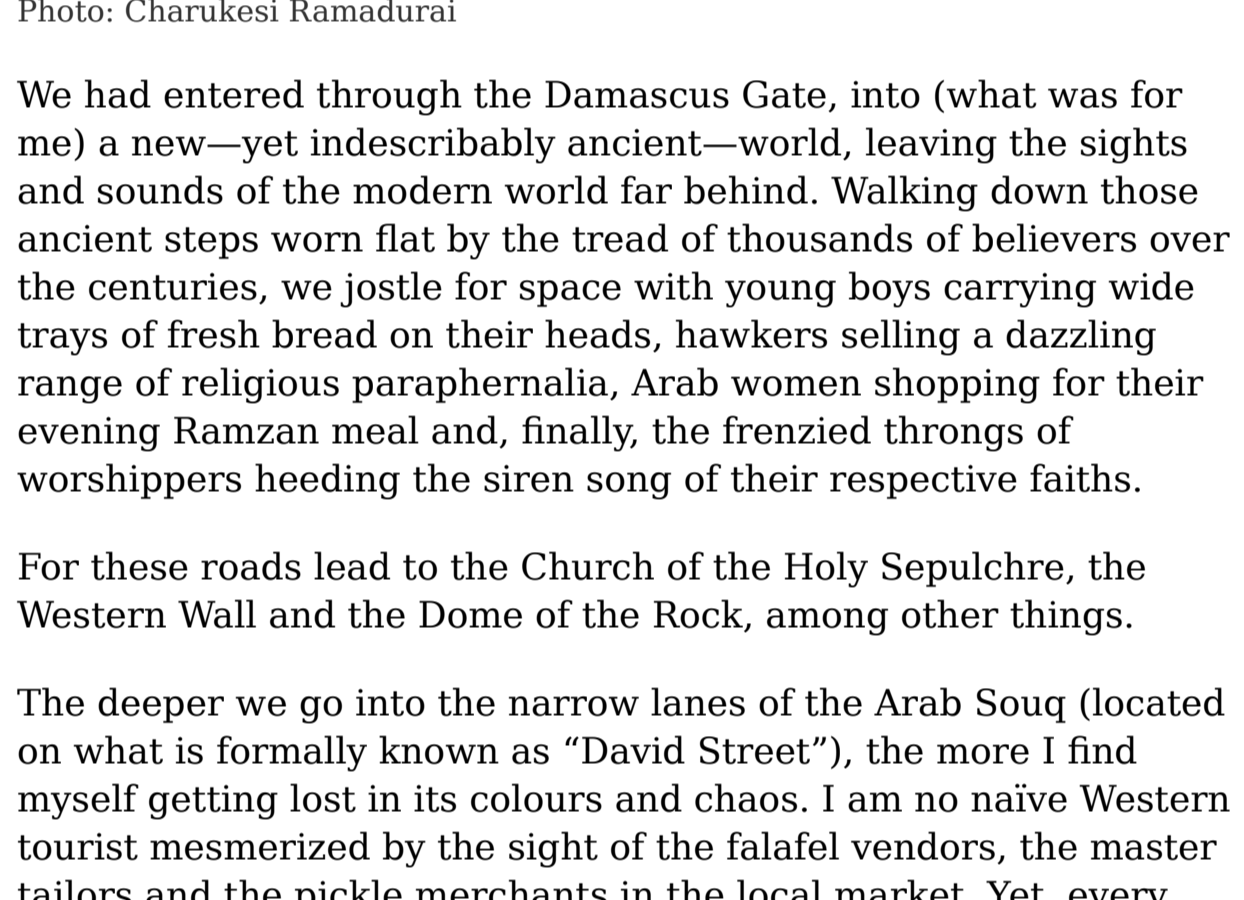


Photo: Charukesi Ramadurai

We had entered through the Damascus Gate, into (what was for me) a new—yet indescribably ancient—world, leaving the sights and sounds of the modern world far behind. Walking down those ancient steps worn flat by the tread of thousands of believers over the centuries, we jostle for space with young boys carrying wide trays of fresh bread on their heads, hawkers selling a dazzling range of religious paraphernalia, Arab women shopping for their evening Ramzan meal and, finally, the frenzied throngs of worshippers heading the siren song of their respective faiths.

For these roads lead to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock, among other things.

The deeper we go into the narrow lanes of the Arab Souq (located on what is formally known as "David Street"), the more I find myself getting lost in its colours and chaos. I am no naive Western tourist mesmerized by the sight of the falafel vendors, the master tailors and the pickle merchants in the local market. Yet, every nook is enticing, every turn seeming to hold a secret.

When I had initially read about Jerusalem and the various Christian, Jewish, Armenian and Muslim quarters of the city, I had imagined it to be some sort of neat jigsaw puzzle, the multiple faiths and neighbourhoods fitting into each other at convenient spots. Instead, what I found was a gigantic pastiche, the ethnic communities intersecting and moving away randomly, frenziedly.

I have stopped for a bit of people-watching at a busy intersection where the overhead signboard suggests that all it takes is a choice of lane to fetch up at the most significant landmark for three of the world's largest religions. A bunch of floppy European tourists—all women, heads covered with scarves—stop for a group selfie at an innocuous spot on the wall, marked by an old wooden door. Moghadam breaks into my reveries to casually point out that Veronica wiped his face when Jesus Christ fell for the third time here.

That is when I realize how much the line between then and now, history and mythology, is blurred in Jerusalem.

We are on the famed Via Dolorosa (Way of Sorrow), the path that Jesus Christ purportedly walked centuries ago bearing the cross to pay for the sins of all humanity. His journey is clearly marked by 14 stations, each where a significant event occurred. It begins with the spot where he was condemned to death, all the way through where he donned the crown of thorns to where he met his mother on his utterly poignant journey.

Christ, it is said, was heading to the mount of Golgotha, where he was ultimately crucified. That spot is now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—the last five stations are inside the church, including, most significantly, the spot where he was buried. Not surprisingly, this is the most sacred place in Jerusalem for Christians, who weep silently at his burial mound, and later at the Stone of Anointing, close to the main entrance, where Jesus Christ's body was said to be prepared for burial.

As I watch quietly from a corner, a single woman of South-east Asian origin places her head upon the rectangular slab, and within seconds, her shoulders are heaving with silent sobs. The other worshippers, with their candles and flowers, move aside respectfully to give space to her tears and piety. In the middle of the crowds, she manages to find a solitary moment with her god.

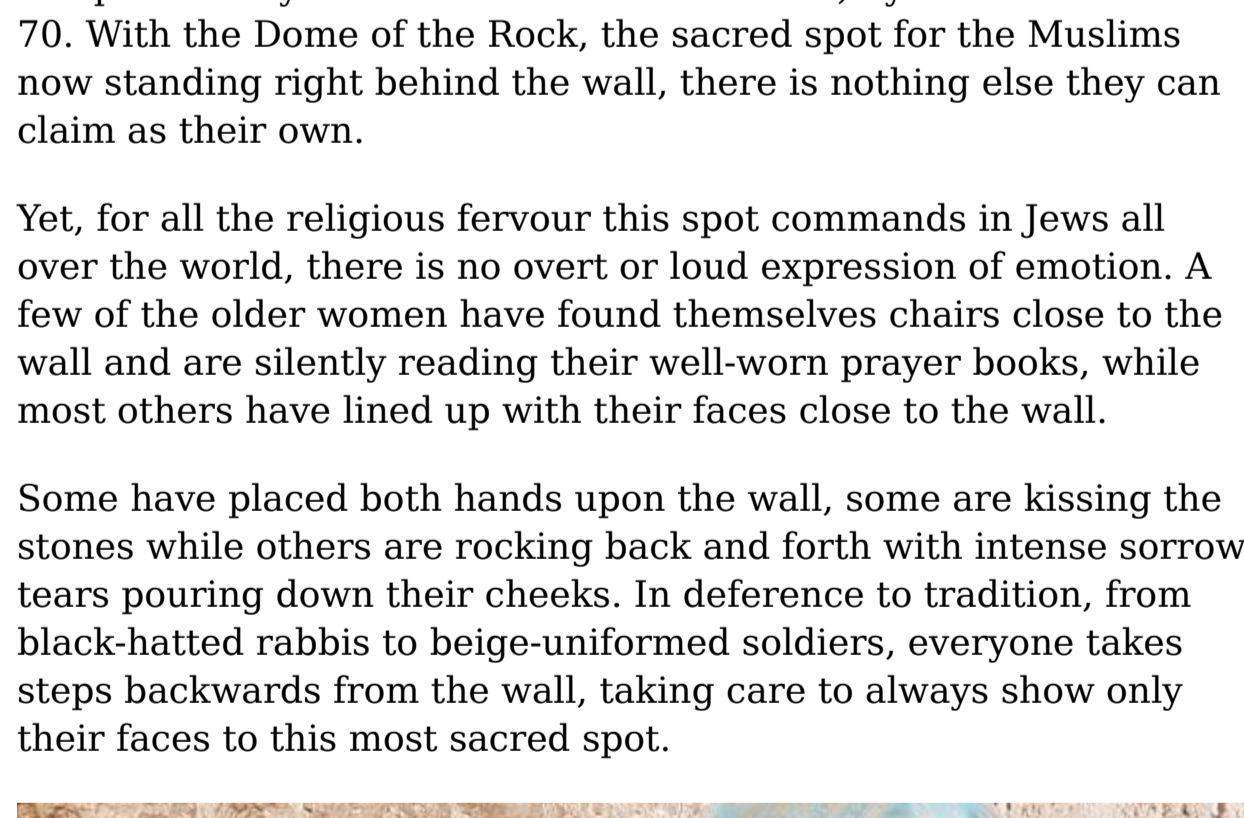


Photo: Charukesi Ramadurai

An hour later, we move through more crowded markets and lanes, through the Armenian quarters, towards the Western Wall. The Western Wall is just that, a pockmarked limestone wall rising 60ft into the air. It is bleak and imposing, dwarfing the women praying in front of it. The genders are segregated here, as in most other devotional places in Jerusalem; the men and the women on either side of the makeshift barrier united in their grief.

For, this spot, also known as the Wailing Wall, is where Jews gather to mourn the destruction of the Temple Mount (part of the Second Temple built by Herod the Great circa 20 BC) by the Romans in AD 70. With the Dome of the Rock, the sacred spot for the Muslims now standing right behind the wall, there is nothing else they can claim as their own.

Yet, for all the religious fervour this spot commands in Jews all over the world, there is no overt or loud expression of emotion. A few of the older women have found themselves chairs close to the wall and are silently reading their well-worn prayer books, while most others have lined up with their faces close to the wall.

Some have placed both hands upon the wall, some are kissing the stones while others are rocking back and forth with intense sorrow, tears pouring down their cheeks. In deference to tradition, from black-hatted rabbis to beige-uniformed soldiers, everyone takes steps backwards from the wall, taking care to always show only their faces to this most sacred spot.

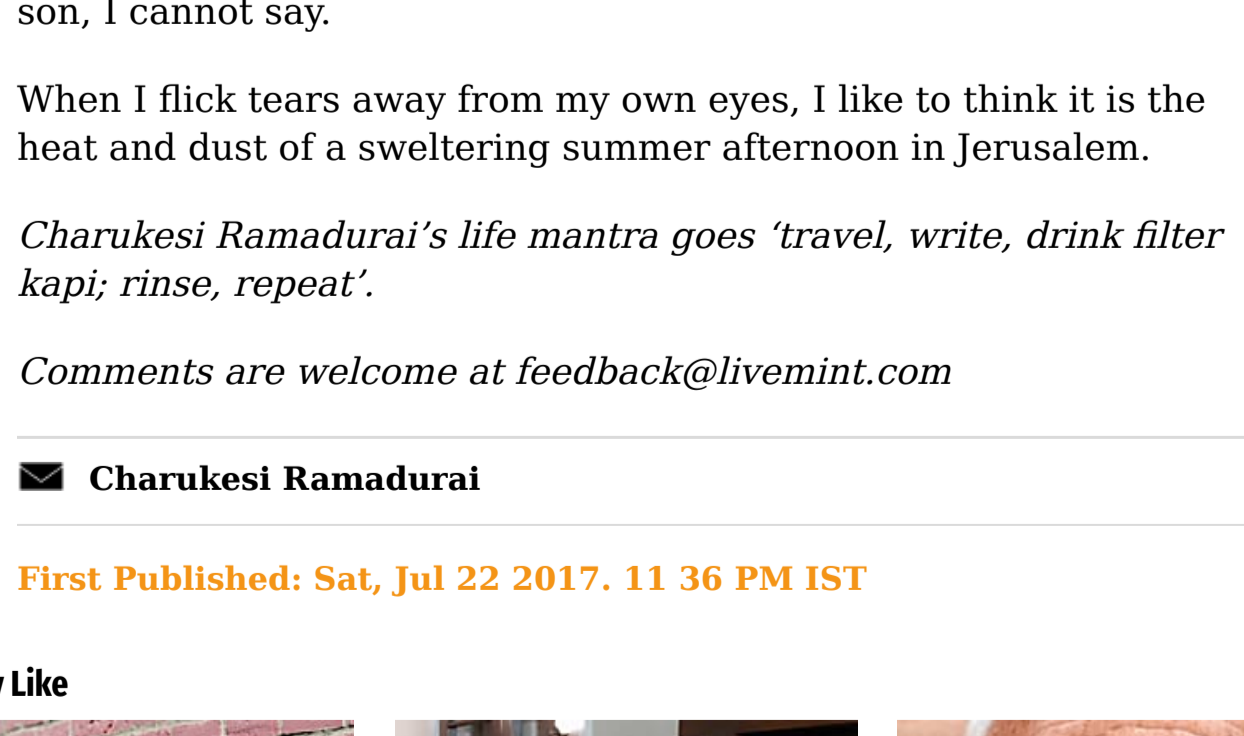


Photo: Charukesi Ramadurai

Inside this enclosure, there are tourists as far away as Australia and America, drawn by the curious geographical concept that is Israel. There are clusters of rabbis, talking in muted whispers about what I assume are deep philosophical matters. There are Bar Mitzvah (ceremony to mark a Jewish boy turning 13) celebratory groups, mostly from America, families taking this opportunity to visit their spiritual homeland. Finally, there are the faithful, who are there to convey their unflinching devotion to their god.

I am mostly unmoved by it all; to each their own faith, and ways of expressing it. As I stand to a side, taking in the scene, a small boy, no older than six, walks solemnly to the wall and tucks a folded piece of paper into a crevice, sending a message up to his version of god. He then turns to his mother with a toothy grin; she has tears in her eyes, whether from her own moment of devotion or from watching this moment of unadulterated optimism from her son, I cannot say.

When I flick tears away from my own eyes, I like to think it is the heat and dust of a sweltering summer afternoon in Jerusalem.

Charukesi Ramadurai's life mantra goes 'travel, write, drink filter kafi; rinse, repeat'.

Comments are welcome at feedback@livemint.com

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