

Jewish Morocco -Then and Now

First, first, I want to prove my credentials- that I was there in the Sahara:

Last time I rode a camel was 50 years ago in the Sinai. I will wait another 50 years before I try again. He was the meanest one of the bunch(I held on; another traveler was thrown off!)



First and foremost, I have to say that I have a great appreciation for the Moroccans that we met. Especially for Americans—

On December 20, 1777, the Kingdom of Morocco became the first country in the world to recognize United States independence, only a year and a half after the U.S. Declaration of Independence was issued... Morocco was the first Amazigh, Arab, African, Muslim states to sign a treaty with America.



(Wikipedia)

The people were warm, friendly, and peaceful, going out of their way to be helpful. We saw very little police presence, except for traffic checks at the entrance to the main cities,

and even when we were walking in some of the poorest sections of Casablanca, we felt secure (no pickpocketing, such as I encountered in Italy). It is listed as one of the safest countries, relatively stable, well-developing, and fairly democratic.



Using garlic bulbs to balance scale



Someone's dinner for iftar

We went on public buses, through upscale and low scale districts, and watched high school kids give up their seats to the elderly, and help a blind woman get off the bus safely. Try taking public transit now in LA under the same conditions.

Of course, it doesn't hurt to see the lives of the rich and famous also:



Courtyard inside the moderately priced suite of Royal Mansour Hotel, only \$5000 a night. Top suite is \$40 K.

It was Ramadan during most of our trip, and I had read that as it draws towards a close, people tend to get anxious and irritable. However, I saw none of that, and, I think the fact of the local Muslims being in a kind of extended “ Yom Kippur” made them more thoughtful.

During the day, the streets were relatively quiet-but after Sunset, after the Iftar meal, everything perked up.



Here, in the large Mall in Casablanca, life began at 10:30 pm , as the band led the crowd in: Aicha

https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipMgPC1v2vBTkZ9Zw5GDVkvFXE47d0D5xrD8yjGdN0Z0cRlu-0_GZetK9bdJmPeHcA/photo/AF1QipNMBhpn1JnRAsIqEoAe8S4WbISZFfMAHoVEyPSH

and our friends, Israelis, all recognized it in its Hebrew version: Song Aicha by Chaim Moshe <https://youtu.be/pkptnKA7AT8>

At the end, the Id al Fitr, and the days of public holiday that followed, people were just in a plain good mood.

So, we'll take this popular melody as our point of commonality. Morocco has managed to have relations with Israel, even if behind the scenes, since 1948, and, officially, since 2020.

Israelis tourists and business people have been going to Morocco so often, that it seems like everyone there speaks Hebrew. Here's a sales pitch for Moroccan Argan oil:

https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipMgPC1v2vBTkZ9Zw5GDVkvFXE47d0D5xrD8yjGdN0Z0cRlu-0_GZetK9bdJmPeHcA/photo/AF1QipMVbfWMP6IypY_6hZjmCOONuKiSYAV5SJ1S4Z4N

Probably more than any other Arab state, Moroccans are keenly aware of a Jewish connection, and the Holocaust has been taught in the school system since 2019, and school textbooks teach a very favorable image of Jews:

<https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/moroccan-textbooks-teach-appreciation-jewish-life-and-tolerance-kingdom>

... Morocco's Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training ... the country's elementary school textbooks depict Jews as an integral part of Moroccan society whose heritage and societal contributions are national assets. This poses a contrast to textbooks in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, where Jews are routinely demonized and positive descriptions of Jews are scarce.

How deep does it really go?

At every point, our guide emphasized the Berber /Amazigh connection to Jews, as well as his own Berber roots. For reference, Berber, or, as they prefer, Amazigh (Free People) are the indigenous people of North Africa, preceding the Arab conquest, and still fighting to maintain a distinct language and identity:





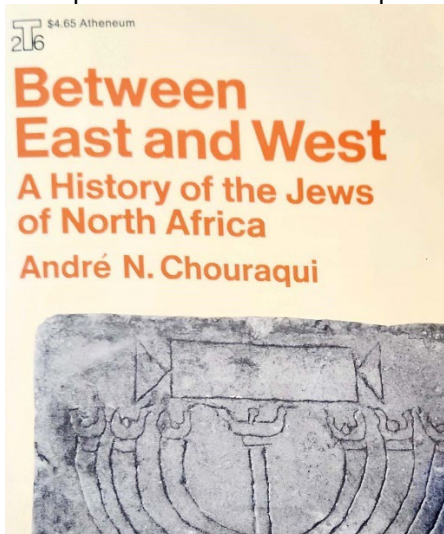
Mourad El Bairi

Here's his card, a great guide, I can't praise him highly enough.

Our guide up the rocks to the waterfall at Ourika, deep inside Berber Atlas Mountains, made the same point. (Thank you, Ali, for keeping me from falling off & breaking my head)

Where does this idea , of Jewish roots, come from?

Excerpts from Andre N Chouraqui Between East and West



(An impressive work- I had it with me & gave my copy to our guide)

Pp 3-5

...frequently recurring legend that ascribes a Palestinian origin to the indigenous Berbers. The Byzantine historian Procopius, ... the Phoenicians, fleeing before Joshua, left their Palestinian homeland and migrated across Egypt, spreading out as far as the Pillars of Hercules.

... in his days the natives of North Africa spoke Punic(Phonician), a language closely akin to Hebrew. ...a Punic inscription on two stone columns at Tigisis: "It is we who have taken flight before that bandit, Joshua son of Nun." ...persistence of this legend derives from the profoundly Semitic character of North Africa during the nearly seven centuries of Carthaginian domination.

... that the Berbers were of Canaanite origin, a theory which was taken up by Moslem writers Ibn Khaldun, the ingenious Moslem historian, wrote: "The Berbers are the descendants of Canaan, son of Ham, son of Noah. ... They received their Judaism from their powerful neighbors, the Israelites of Syria."

Josephus, however, went further, ascribing to the Berbers a Semitic origin and tracing their descent from Midian, son of Abraham by his second wife Keturah.

A talmudic text, which a Tosefta of the second century C.E. spoke of the migration to Africa of the Girgashites, one of the seven nations dwelling in Canaan at the time of Joshua. "The Girgashites departed (voluntarily from Palestine at the request of Joshua) and for this reason they were given a fine land for their patrimony: Africa[refers to North Africa- Carthage region]

Pp 8-9

.. the first communities of any importance date from about the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. The second exile to Babylon was also accompanied by a westward migration. The first Jewish settlers retained in their new environment the use of their own language which their Punic neighbors understood. The similarity in background made it easy for them to adapt to their new home and find an atmosphere that was similar to the one they had been forced to abandon.

[Note: Hannibal- Hani-Ba'al,(Chananyah) Hasdrubal Barca-Ezra-Ba'al Barak or Baruch,(Azariah]

[Jewish numbers grew at fall of Temple:]

P11-12

It has been estimated that thirty thousand Jews were deported to Carthage by Titus and Josephus recorded the presence of five hundred thousand Jews in Cyrenaica.... North Africa was at this time the center of extensive conversion to Judaism.

Rebellion by Jews of Cyrenaica...The brutal repression of 118 C.E. marked the end of the development of Judaism in Cyrenaica. The survivors fled westward into the Caesarean province and southward, crossing the Sahara from oasis to oasis, eventually perhaps reaching as far as the Niger River.

{Jewish settlements spread westward}

P 13

In Mauritania[Roman colony, between Morocco and Algeria] there were communities at Sitifis (Sétif), Auzia (Aumale), Tipasa, where the Jews built a synagogue toward the middle of the fourth century, Cherchel and Volubilis, the site of the oldest Jewish inscription so far discovered in North Africa...reads "Matrona, daughter of Rabbi Yehuda, Rest [in Peace]."



(a)



(b)

P 21

What drew Berbers to Judaism?

The weapons were the concepts of monotheism, a moral code and a liturgy inspired by the Bible. The Berbers, semitically inclined through centuries of Carthaginian influence, were only

too ready to abandon their idols and swell the ranks of the Jewish faithful, or at least of their sympathizers—those who frequented the synagogues and picked up ideas which they integrated in some form or another into their pagan beliefs. Tertullian, in the third century, reported that the Berbers observed the Sabbath, the Jewish festivals and fasts, and the dietary laws.

This expansion of Judaism was stopped, not by pagan Rome, but by Christian Rome—extreme measures to suppress Jews and Jewish identity in those realms.

The Berbers resisted, in general, against the Romans, and later, against the Arab conquerors. The heroine of this resistance, was a “reputedly” Jewish Queen:

The legend of the Jewish warrior queen

Ibn Khaldun wrote that when the Arabs reached North Africa, “a number of the Berbers professed Judaism. Among the Jewish Berbers there were the Jerawa, a tribe which inhabited the Aurès region and to which belonged Kahena, ..

“Hassan... which was the most powerful chieftain in Ifrikyā. He was told of a woman who ruled the Berbers, ...Ka-hena. She dwelt, so he was told, in the Aures mountains. This Jewish woman could foretell the future and all that she predicted came to pass without fail. If she were killed, Hassan was told, he would meet no further resistance or rivalry. Hassan marched against her.”[And lost] This victory made Kahena queen of the Maghreb; but her kingdom lasted only five years.

[Note: Maghreb-West, as in Ma’arav, Hebrew.

Morocco is Maghreb al Aqsa- The farthest west -it faces the Atlantic, not Mediterranean]

Was she really Jewish, or was she a mix of Jewish, Christian and pagan-- it hard to resolve, but from this point on, the bulk of Berber tribes accepted Islam. However, as elsewhere there was a stubborn surviving remnant. DNA studies today show that the Jewish Berbers of North Africa still show closer affinity to other Jews, whether Ashkenazai or Mizrahi, than to their Berber neighbors

These are referred to, in Morocco, as “Toshavim”—The Residents.

Excavating ancient Berber synagogue:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/abraham-accords-allow-israelis-to-excavate-two-huge-genizas-found-in-rural-morocco/>

In use for centuries till abandoned in 1950’s mass emigration. Oufra, some remains dating to 3rd century.



Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2418519> c1900



Berber Jewish Woman-note use of facial tattoos



<http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/4725/features/the-last-berber-jews/?print>

To these were added a growing wave of Jews from Spain—some during the Almohades oppression (such as the Rambam, Maimonides,) others from the time of the Spanish expulsion and inquisition: the “Megurashim”, The Expelled Ones”. Jews also came here from Italy at the same time.



Delacroix-Jewish Woman of Algiers



from DeLacroix Jewish Wedding in Morocco-

Notice that Delacroix used Jewish women, because they were freer than their Muslim counterparts to go about unveiled. This openness to the world for women shaped the nature of the Jewish ghetto- the Mellah (from Salt, perhaps because of salt sellers area).

In the Moslem sections of the old “Medina”, there are no windows to the outside-only to the inside courtyard. There was only a lattice, high above street level, whereby a woman could peek through to see who was at the door. The Jewish balconies were open wide, Jewish women would stand on the balconies, and call out to their neighbors.

(In Israel, Jewish mother’s still shout out to the kids down below form the balcony)



Together, Amazigh and Sephardi shaped the Moroccan Jewish story.

Life under Islam was only comparatively better than under Christianity, so that Jews were always in the status of “dhimmi”, 2nd class, and sometimes, the object of actual physical attacks. The status of Jews went up and down at the whim of the current ruler, and they survived, primarily because they proved to be too valuable to Islamic civilization—the craftsmen, the money lenders(as in Europe) and the merchants capable of doing business in both Muslim and Christian lands, again, just as in Christian Europe.

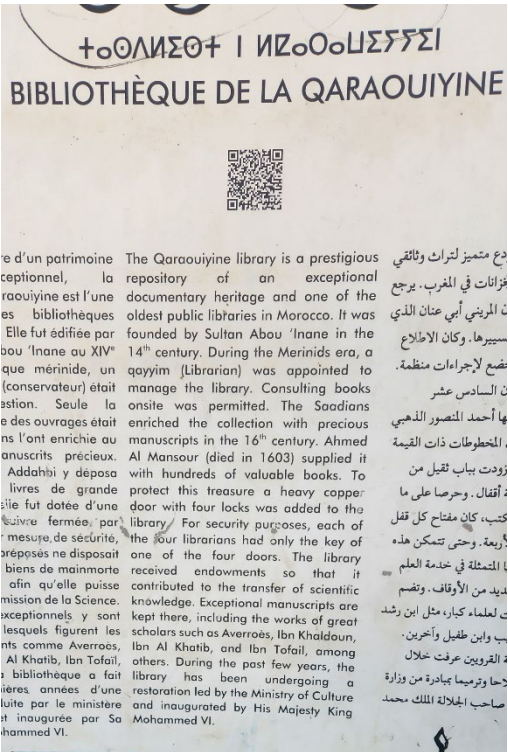
Europeans needed the Jewish connection for trade with North Africa— however, when the Europeans discovered the world, and sailing both the Atlantic and the Pacific—the Middle East and Morocco with it, became less important= and so did the Jews.

Nevertheless, when Islamic civilization was at its heyday, Morocco was at the forefront of intellectual development:

The first University- founded by a woman- to issue actual degrees for levels of study:

al-Qarawiyyin (from **Kairouan,now Tunisia**)in Fes was founded as a mosque in 857 or 859 by Fatima al-Fihri, beating Al Azhar in Cairo by a century, and Bologna by 2 centuries! Ibn Khaldun, the medieval father of modern economics, sociology, and historiography, spent time in Fes.

Entrance to Library: [top line is Berber Tifinagh text]



In tandem, Morocco became a center for Jewish learning:

P 82-83

Rabbi Judah ibn Kuraish ... and was known as the “Father of Hebrew Grammar.” He developed a new approach to the study of this subject through comparison with other Semitic languages

Rabbi Dunash ben Labrat, lived in Fez from 920 to 990. ... firmly established the principle of triple-letter roots for Hebrew verbs to replace the two-letter theory.

... the symbol of Hebrew scholarship in North Africa was undoubtedly Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob Alfassi (1013–1103), a native of Fez and a graduate of its Hebrew colleges. He drew up a compendium of the Talmud which was a synthesis of a thousand years of rabbinical teaching. ...

His work was studied in Spain, in Provence, in the Rhineland, in Central Europe and in Poland and is still taught in rabbinical schools the world over.

P 101

It was the rabbinical academies of Kairouan, Tunis, Algiers, Tlemcen and Fez, and the lesser schools that were founded in other centers throughout the Maghreb, that served as the guardians and propagators of learning and culture among North African Jewry. In them is to be found the inner power that sustained Judaism in the Maghreb through the long centuries of oppression and humiliation which followed.

Morocco became known as a place of major Kabbalistic Rabbis, and their graves were pilgrimage sites for Muslims as well as Jews, and even for some New York Hasidim who were on the plane with us.

The economic status of the Jews went downhill , with many Jews reduced to dire poverty, restricted to the Melah. Until the rediscovery of the value of North Africa to the newly powerful European powers, who now could beat back the Ottomans as well as the Beys of North Africa- and they discovered Jews, as much as the Jews discovered the Europeans, and only as we begin modern times, does the condition of Jews improve. Prior to [World War II](#), the Jewish population of Morocco reached 225,000.

However, as Jews entered the modern era, and they were now identified with the French, there were outbreaks of violence.

To the credit of King Mohammed V, he protected the Jews against the Vichy French allies of Hitler:

. Morocco's King Mohammed V met with representatives from [Nazi Germany](#) and [Vichy France](#) during the [Holocaust](#) . The Moroccan King famously stated, there are no Jewish citizens, there are no [Muslims](#) citizens, they are all Moroccans. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jews-of-morocco>

Nevertheless, there were outbreaks of violence against Jews, especially in 1948, and Jews began leaving. When Morocco became fully independent from France, 1956, the gates were closed shut on them, and only in 1963, were the rest allowed to leave.

Today, there are only about 2500 Jews still living in Morocco, while the bulk of the community is now in Israel, as well as France and even here in LA, including members here at our synagogue. However, the few that remained are very prominent, such as Andre Azoulay, advisor to the kings, and many Jews, especially Israelis, have significant business relations with Morocco.

Enough said: Here is a visual tour of some significant Jewish sites in Morocco:



Al Azama Synagogue (The Exiles)

Classroom



Courtyard
Sign

at

entrance



“All will know, testify and report that there is no Torah as the Torah from Marakkech

the Slat El-Azama Synagogue

LAAZAMA Synagogue was built by Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. Rabbi Yitzhak Daloya, who lived in Spain, arrived in the city of Marrakech, following the expulsion of Jews from Spain by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand in 1492. Served as president of the court and head of the community of deportees in Marrakesh, he founded the "Tzlat Laazama", "Synagogue of Deportees", which was built shortly after his arrival in Marrakech.

The Moroccan Jewish community dates back to King Solomon and the Roman period. Jews and Berbers settled in Morocco throughout history. Marrakech was founded in 1062 by ruler of the Halmorabidim Joseph Ibn Tasifin who allowed Jewish settlement in the city. Renewal of the Jewish community took place in 1269. The head of the community was Rabbi Yehuda Jian, originally from southern Spain. At the end of the 15th century many refugees came to the city from Spain and Portugal, but still the Atlas Jews constituted the majority of the community. This situation changed in the 16th century when Marrakech became a major center for Marranos who wished to return to Judaism, passing on the control of the community for generations to come. Spanish and Portuguese Marrakech Jews lived in their own neighborhoods until all local Jews, some 30,000, were collected by order of the King in 1557, settling them in the Mellah. In the 19th century the population increased in the Mellah, after many refugees from the Atlas Mountains joined the community, and Marrakech became the largest Jewish community in Morocco.





El Azama Synagoue

bab il mlach



Gate of the Mlach (Mellah)



Rabbi Bitoun synagogue

melach Jewish house
open balcony







Dar Ima Kosher Restaurant

Fes-

Typical Passageway inside the old city, medina.





stork nest

A reminder that Morocco is the gateway between Africa and Europe for birds and people on the west, the land of Israel in tandem, on the east.

Aben Danan Synagogue





The AlMemar- the Rabbi's stand- a uniquely Sephardic element





17th cent torah fes

mikveh



The Jewish Cemetery-list of great Rabbis buried here since 1672



The grave of Solicha Hachouel. Jews call her *Sol HaTzaddikah* ("the righteous Sol"), while Arabs call her *Lalla Suleika* or *Lalla Zoulikha* ("holy lady Suleika").^[5] According to [The Jewish Encyclopedia](#) Hachuel "was a martyr to her faith, preferring death to becoming the bride of the sultan







Rabbi Yehudah ibn Atar



Essauoia(Mogodor) an ancient Jewish trading outpost, now abandoned

A sign of old times- a wine cellar belonging to a Jewish merchant, now a restaurant (building still owned by the Jewish family)





Tribute to Moses Assayag for donating the funds for the school

A mezuzah moujted in the stone wall



A street in the mlach





Jewish student school schedule

توزيع الساعات للاسلاط والتخيرية						
المجلس						
مدرسة الساعات						
لدرجة מכירה						
יום ראשון	שני	שלישי	רביעי	חמישי	ששי	זמן השעור
מוסר	מוסר	מוסר	מוסר	מוסר	מוסר	0"45
קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	1"00
חמדי תורה	כתיבה	כתיבה	כתיבה	כתיבה	ספרי תורה	0"50
זמרה	דקלום	זמרה	דקלום	זמרה	דקלום	0"15
	ה	פ	ס	ק	ה	0"15
קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	קריאה	0"30
מספרים	לשון הקודש	לשון הקודש	לשון הקודש	לשון הקודש	מספרים	0"30
התעמלות	הקודש	הקודש	הקודש	הקודש	התעמלות	0"15
תפילה וברכות	תפילה וברכות	תפילה וברכות	תפילה וברכות	תפילה וברכות	זמרה ודקלום	0"50
المواد						
מקצועות						
אחلاق	מוסר	1"30				
التسلوة	קריאה	9"00				
التشوراة	ספרי תורה	1"00				
כתיבה	כתיבה	2"00				
זמירות ודקלום	זמרה ודקלום	2"00				
הפסקה	הפסקה	1"30				
מספרים	מספרים	1"00				
לשון הקודש	לשון הקודש	3"00				
התעמלות	התעמלות	1"00				
תפילה וברכות	תפילה וברכות	2"00				

Report card!!

הכנסת הכסף והאסטרטגיה									
1960 בתחילת השנה									
הכנסת הכסף והאסטרטגיה									
מס' הדירה	שטח	מס' הדירה	שטח	מס' הדירה	שטח	מס' הדירה	שטח	מס' הדירה	שטח
1	57	10	9	8	10	10	10	10	10
2	53	10	9	8	8	10	10	10	10
3	48	10	9	8	7	7	10	10	10
4	48	10	6	8	8	6	10	10	10
5	45	10	6	5	9	6	9	9	9
6	44	9	6	5	6	9	6	6	6
7	44	8	7	5	6	6	10	10	10
8	43	10	6	8	7	6	8	8	8
9	43	9	5	7	7	7	9	9	9
10	42	10	7	2	7	7	10	10	10
11	41	3	6	8	7	5	10	10	10
12	41	10	5	7	4	5	10	10	10
13	40	10	4	7	7	6	6	6	6
14	40	8	6	7	6	6	7	7	7
15	39	8	6	8	9	7	8	8	8
16	38	0	6	8	4	6	7	7	7
17	38	8	5	0	7	6	9	9	9
18	36	9	5	3	6	6	8	8	8
19	35	8	4	3	6	6	8	8	8
20	35	8	4	7	2	5	9	9	9
21	35	8	4	7	7	6	6	6	6
22	35	8	6	7	8	5	6	6	6
23	34	10	6	0	6	5	9	9	9
24	34	10	4	0	2	5	7	7	7
25	29	8	4	3	2	5	7	7	7



There is a Pinto Center, run by the famous Rabbis descendants, here in Los Angeles, on Pico.



A well of water for blessings from the Rabbi

The main synagogue of Casablanca, still in use, but very few local Jews in actual attendance, mostly tourists like us.

