

Journey through the Mediterranean:
Past and Present Attitudes toward the History of Moroccan Jews
Final Report
By Charles Danan

After the destruction of the Second Temple nearly two thousand years ago, exiled Jews spread to almost every corner of the world, diversifying their traditions and practices. Until the Second World War, many Jewish communities thrived from The Americas to Southern Asia, each with their own appearance, culture, and history. But after the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the Jewish diaspora underwent a major change. The center of gravity of the Jewish world shifted from Europe to North America. At the same time the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 opened the gates for a massive immigration of Jewish refugees from Europe and the Muslim world. In a relatively short amount of time, much of the diaspora was emptied. In some places, two thousand years of independent cultural development were abandoned in favor of a new life in a Jewish state or a Western country. My father's home of Morocco was no exception. Where there were as many as a third of a million Jews in 1948, only three thousand remain today. My father left his birthplace of Marrakech in 1963, settling in Ashdod, Israel. In the early sixties, Marrakech was still home to tens of thousands of Jews, a community that had resided there since medieval times. Today there are only about two hundred living in that city of over one million people.

This migration was unprecedented. Two millennia of generations passed down a tradition specific to one region of the world, and then all of that history was seemingly surrendered in a handful of decades. Nearly everyone simply left. Last spring I began wondering how this migration might threaten Jewish Moroccan culture. What is the state of Moroccan Jewish

identity today? The Jewish population of Morocco has nearly disappeared. Do the Jews of Morocco and Israel still commemorate and maintain the culture of Moroccan Jewry? What role do the non-Jews of Morocco play? And what of times past in Spain? Many Moroccan Jews truly exist in a double diaspora. After being expelled from Jerusalem in 70 CE, some of the dispersed settled in what is today Morocco, where their numbers were augmented by local Berber tribes who converted to Judaism. But others eventually migrated to Spain, living there until 1492, when the Catholic rulers once again expelled them amid the fervor of the Spanish Inquisition. This was the era in which the largest groups of Spanish, or Sephardi, Jews arrived on Moroccan shores. How was the Sephardi Jewish past being remembered or forgotten in the Sephardi homeland of Spain?

When I began to reflect on the enormity of these questions, it became clear that in order to better understand the Sephardi diaspora I had to be there myself. I wanted to know if and how a unique Moroccan Jewish identity was being remembered and maintained in the times of a nearly-emptied diaspora. Thus, with the aid of the Blankfeld Fund, I set out on a two month journey that took me across Spain, Morocco, and Israel. Beginning in Barcelona and ending in Jerusalem, I traced the *roughly* chronological migration of my ancestors through the Iberian Peninsula, across the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco, and over the Mediterranean to the shores of Israel. I would look at the preservation of history in museums, monuments and abandoned Jewish quarters, the practices in active synagogues, shrines, and cemeteries, and most importantly, the current opinions of Jews and non-Jews towards Moroccan Jewry and its past.

From Barcelona, I travelled through Catalonia, a region of northeastern Spain where Jews were expelled in 1391, one hundred years earlier than the rest of the peninsula. There I visited one of Europe's best preserved Jewish quarters and one of its oldest synagogues, dating back to

the Roman era. I also spent the Shabbat at a modern Sephardi synagogue, and saw how Judaism in Spain was being reconstituted by immigrant Moroccan Jews. I then made my way to Madrid and Toledo, the heart of modern Spain where the Edict of Expulsion was issued in 1492, but also where modern Spanish Judaism began anew. In Toledo, I stayed with a local who happened to also be a history buff. Despite being non-Jewish, he was enthusiastic about his city's Jewish history. We toured the Judería, or Jewish quarter, and visited Spain's most impressive restored synagogues, monuments to the golden years of Sephardi history. Afterward I trekked south to the Andalusian cities of Granada, Cordoba, and Seville. Andalusia is the former Iberian Muslim kingdom where Sephardic life and intellectual culture truly blossomed at the beginning of the second millennium. This was the last outpost of medieval Judaism in Iberia until the city of Granada fell to the Spanish Catholics in 1492. I happened to arrive in Cordoba in the midst of the 12th International Sephardi Music Festival. There I attended a Sephardi cooking class and listened to Andalusian Jewish music fill the air where it had been silenced for over 700 years.

Next I moved further south, across the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco, taking the same route many Jews and Muslims took to flee the armies of the Catholic Kings. In Morocco I began in Chefchaouen, a northern mountain town whose mesmerizing blue color is owed to Jewish refugees. From Chefchaouen, I made my way to Fez, a stronghold of medieval Moroccan Judaism and the home of my family name. There I met a young man who identified himself, at age 24, as the youngest Jew living in the entire city. He invited me to tour the old Jewish quarter with him. He took me to the Jewish cemetery and we searched for Danan, my family name. We found that the most respected rabbis and leaders of Fez were, in fact, almost all Danans. Their gravestones read that they were descendants of one of Judaism's most revered thinkers, Moses Maimonides of Cordoba. There were some family rumors about being related to Maimonides,

but it was incredible to see the truth actually carved in stone. We completed the family history tour at the Ibn Danan synagogue, a house of prayer that was dedicated to my ancestors over 300 years ago, and recently restored with the aid of UNESCO. It was vindicating and moving to trace my family history to both Spain and such important leaders.

After a lengthy stay in Fez, I took the train to Casablanca, the modern, commercial heart of Morocco. In Casablanca, I celebrated Shabbat with a Moroccan Jewish family. My host family had recently returned to Morocco after abandoning their attempt to make a new life in Israel. It was a fascinating and unique opportunity to learn how Moroccan Jewish identity was still being preserved in the face of pressure to immigrate. From Casablanca I took a bus to Marrakech, a city filled with the stories passed down from my father and his family. I prayed in my father's old synagogue, tracked down his old street, and took in the sounds and smells of a city which—in some ways—has refused to change in the 50 years since he left. After Marrakech, I made multiple journeys into the countryside, experiencing the more remote regions of the country. I hunted down the tomb of a medieval Jewish saint where my father used to make pilgrimage. I also trekked to the remote towns and villages where many Jews once lived amongst the Berbers, the native people of Morocco. The traditions of this ancient Moroccan Jewish life seemed most in jeopardy, but I still encountered some surprises, such as the village on the fringes of the Sahara Desert where nine Jewish families had returned to restore Jewish practice and construct a new synagogue.

From Marrakech I flew to Israel, home to over one million Moroccan Jews and their descendants. There I spoke extensively with family and new friends, shedding light on the meaning of Morocco to Israel's Moroccan community. I gained new insight from the vivid stories of my father's older siblings and also had numerous chance encounters with Israel's

young descendants of Moroccan Jews. Finally, I concluded in Jerusalem, the holy city where Moroccan Jewish history first began.

When I last reported from Casablanca, halfway through my trip, I had seen more than I could have hoped for and had also come to some general conclusions:

The preservation of Jewish history was thorough and widespread throughout both Spain and Morocco. It was easy to find points of Jewish interest on maps, street signs, and tours. Especially in Spain, Jewish history was visible everywhere and also well organized. Nearly every city I visited across the country had a Jewish history museum, a well-marked former Jewish quarter, and often restored buildings and/or Jewish archeological sites. All of these locations could be identified online on a highly detailed Google map developed by the Red de Juderías de España (the Network of Jewish Quarters of Spain). In Morocco, preservation was not so systematized, but Judaism was not difficult to encounter. There was only one official Jewish history museum in the entire country, but many of the greatest old synagogues and cemeteries were being looked after by Muslim caretakers. Additionally, some non-Jewish museums would make reference to Jewish history and displayed some of the belongings and handiwork of Jews who had emigrated in a hurry. Finally, a good number of Morocco's Jewish sites were maintained because of their continued religious relevance, especially the shrines to Jewish saints. Some of these are still visited by Moroccan Jews from all over the world.

It was also interesting for me to note that the preservation of Jewish history in Spain and Morocco was owed in large part to tourist money. Jewish tourism was highly visible and commercialized and I was often greeted by humorous sights such as "Heladeria Juda Levi" (*heladeria* is Spanish for ice cream shop). Although every Spanish city had a Jewish history

museum, some of them were of remarkably poor quality. Sometimes the only substance these places provided was a basic introduction to Judaism, and they gave the impression of being moneymaking ventures. In Morocco, this exploitation was less formal but still present. In Fez, men guarded the doors to the synagogues and cemeteries and demanded money even though these places officially had no entry fees. Tourists had clearly paved a path throughout Jewish Spain and Morocco, and the locals were capitalizing on their interest in Jewish history. Although it was unfortunate to see people being a bit exploitative, the money pouring into these places was clearly keeping the Jewish memory alive. A cheap Jewish museum in Granada might not be worth the money, but at least it signified to locals and tourists alike that Jews were a significant part of the community for centuries. I met a number of non-Jewish locals in both countries, and they were all aware of the Jewish history of their homes.

I was also pleased to find that the practice of Sephardi Judaism continues to exist and even thrive in Spain and Morocco. I was originally expecting to find only small and dwindling communities, aging Jews, or temporary residents. However, I found that the major Jewish communities were in a stable state, and some were even growing. For example, the Jews of Casablanca are a good portion of the city's wealthy elite. Many of them admit to remaining in Morocco due to an unwillingness to give up their successful businesses. They also have good favor with Morocco's king, run the best schools and private clubs, and celebrate Jewish holidays with extravagance and style. There is even a set of Moroccan laws that identifies them as original inhabitants of the land and grants them special rights. In Spain, new laws are also granting Sephardi Jews the opportunity to return to Spain and be granted Spanish citizenship. The communities of Madrid and Barcelona consist largely of Jews from Morocco and other Mediterranean countries. Thus, the Sephardi Jewish population of Spain is being reconstituted to

some degree. In fact, the new laws granting return to Spain have sparked a small tug of war for the wealthy Jews of Morocco. In contrast to many of the conflicts in Moroccan Jewish history, this one has been only beneficial, as both countries vie for Jewish favor. I *did* witness declining and aging communities, especially in Fez, where only the elderly remained. However, it became clear that as long as there was good business and religious tolerance, the Jews of Spain and Morocco would continue to maintain the legacy of Sephardi Judaism within a few economic strongholds.

Finally, modern relations between non-Jews and Jews were, for the most part, very healthy and friendly. In Spain, amongst many of the gentiles there was little exposure to modern Judaism, however everyone I spoke to knew a piece of Jewish history and was well-aware of the Jewish history of their respective cities. In Morocco, the memory of Jewish life was still alive among the middle-aged and elderly Muslims. I was astounded to find how many Moroccan Muslims mourned the recent emigration of the Jews. They truly felt a great sense of loss, and remained confused as to why the Jews ever left. “Didn’t they have good lives? Didn’t they live in peace? We were good friends.” These were sentiments that were repeatedly relayed to me. The younger population often did not have first-hand experience with Jews (save the few wealthy Muslims who attended Jewish-run schools), but they still seemed to have positive views. I had one candid experience at a rural bus stop in which I eavesdropped on a young, middle-class Moroccan man proudly explaining that Jews were original inhabitants of Morocco. Additionally, all Moroccan Jews I spoke to had positive, friendly relationships with the Muslims around them. Many of the young Jewish people were proud to be Moroccan, and had no immediate desire to leave.

By the time I was wrapping up my visit in Casablanca, I was satisfied with all that I had uncovered. I felt like I had already reached the majority of my research goals. As I boarded the bus to Marrakech, I knew I was embarking on a very different stretch of my journey. In an earlier conversation with my sister, I remarked that if I had to choose one place to visit on the trip, it would be Marrakech. It was my father's home and the home of all my known Moroccan relatives. All the fantastic stories I had grown up with emanated from Marrakech. Growing up in Texas and California, my dreams of that distant city are what first compelled me to take great pride in my Moroccan heritage. That pride carried through to the present day and motivated the project which I have just completed. Although research results continued to stream my way, the remainder of the trip would become a time for more slow reflection. As I made my way through Marrakech, the Moroccan countryside, and Israel, I would take more time to consider the personal relevance of this project.

Cumulatively, I spent seven nights in Marrakech, taking in the city and making repeated visits to the *mellah*, or Jewish quarter, where my father grew up. I was excited to find that his old synagogue, among the dozens which once existed there, was the only one still regularly operational within the *mellah*. My first visit to that synagogue revealed a Hebrew map, which allowed me to identify his old street, a narrow alley I had already passed a half-dozen times. I also returned for Shabbat morning services, and was honored with an *aliyah*, or ascension to stand by and bless the Torah as it was being read. After services, conversation with a community member pointed me to the rough location of the tomb of Rabbi Shlomo Ben Llhens in the Atlas Mountains. This was where my father's family made pilgrimage at the end of every summer. After a couple of shared taxi rides and a handful of kilometers lost on foot, asking for directions in French—a language I don't speak—I arrived at the grave. Standing in the lush, river-fed oasis

of the Ourika valley, I immediately understood why that place was home to my father's most cherished Moroccan memories. My detective work was paying off, and I felt motivated to hunt for more firsthand experiences with family history. Between times in Marrakech I stopped in Essaouira, the scenic coastal town where my father and his siblings attended summer camp. I also passed through Berber towns in the Atlas Mountains, some only connected by donkey paths. My uncle had done the same five decades before, back then he was arriving by whatever transport he could find, arranging for Jews in the most remote Berber villages to move to Israel. The number of family-related landmarks and locations I uncovered emboldened and excited me at every turn, and by the time I boarded the plane to Israel I was riding a high of Moroccan pride.

Thus, when I arrived in Israel I was surprised to have all those feelings suddenly cast into doubt. None of my peers, young descendants of Moroccan Jews, seemed interested in visiting their ancestral homeland. For example, in Ashdod, a coastal city south of Tel Aviv, I sat down with my uncle and quizzed him on all of his stories from Morocco. He spoke about incredible journeys working for an international organization that brought Morocco's Jewish people to the new Jewish state. He went trekking through snowy nights on horseback, just to arrive at a small village where only a single Jewish couple lived. Having left at a much older age, his recollection was even more vivid and spectacular than my father's. Therefore, I was surprised when he remarked afterwards that not one of his children—nor any of his nieces and nephews—had ever asked him about his time in Morocco. Why did I feel like the only one so enamored with this history?

After I left Ashdod, I had a number of additional encounters with young Moroccan Jews outside of my family. In the north, I hitchhiked with a soldier whose mother was Moroccan, but

he had little interest in his roots and could not recall the city she was from. Later on, I met another young man in the port city of Haifa whose parents were both from northern Morocco. He remembered where they were born, but he insisted that he was completely uninterested in visiting the country. It wasn't that he was uncomfortable visiting a Muslim nation, or worried about visa issues, he just didn't want to go. "Israel is my home and my history", he insisted. After pressing him further he added, "Look, at my house we eat the Moroccan food and sing the Moroccan songs, but that's it". He wasn't just apathetic, he was adamant and intent on not visiting. He seemed to have a strong Israeli national identity that took precedent. Although I was aware I was not capable of polling a fair sample size, it still became evident that Moroccan identity was fading in many young Israeli people.

When I spoke to an Israeli friend she explained that Moroccan Jewish history was overshadowed by the tragedy of the Holocaust, and Moroccan Jews were also subject in the past to certain forms of discrimination from Israel's European elite. Add to that the fact that there are over one million Moroccans in Israel, and I began to understand that I had been raised with a very different attitude toward my Moroccan heritage. Growing up in the United States I was the only kid I knew of Moroccan Jewish descent. As an American in a tolerant community, all I felt was pride for what made me different from all of my peers. And it was true that my interest in my European roots was comparably muted, after all, so many of America's Jews shared that history; it could never feel completely unique.

However, in the end my mind returned to the young man in Haifa, who despite his disinterest in visiting Morocco, still kept all the traditions his predecessors brought from there. Ultimately, it was true that Moroccan Jewish practice was being maintained across Israel. Behind

my uncle's house was a brilliant new synagogue built by and for the local Moroccan Jewish community. Revered Moroccan rabbis (e.g. the Baba Sali) who settled and died in Israel in modern times, are enshrined and venerated just as their predecessors were in Morocco. The Moroccan celebration of *mimouna*, taking place at the end of every Passover, has become a sort of national holiday in Israel. It's a party put on by Jews across the country, Moroccan or not. And even though many of the young people I spoke to were uninterested, it is true that Morocco sees a large number of Israeli tourists ever year, many of whom are making pilgrimage to the tombs of Jewish saints. While visiting the tomb of Amram ben Diwan in the north, I actually encountered a group of touring Israelis. Even if the living memory of Morocco was fading as the original Moroccan immigrants grew old, there was still a lasting impression made in Israeli culture that would keep a unique Moroccan Jewish identity alive. As I had observed in Spain and Morocco, Moroccan Jews and their antecedents left a permanent mark wherever they went.

On my last day in Israel I was crossing the border into Jordan to reach my flight home out of Amman. I handed the border officer my passport and after looking at it he immediately asked, "Are you Moroccan or something?" He explained that he was Moroccan as well, along with many of the residents of the nearby border town of Beit She'an. There were many Danans there too, he remarked. This was the last Israeli I was going speak to, essentially the final moments of my research trip. I was feeling a bit exasperated considering all my previous interactions with young Moroccan Israelis, so I had to ask, "Do you want to go back and visit Morocco?" He looked at me puzzled, and answered, "Of course!" Then he handed back my passport and I walked out of Israel and began the journey home. My travels had demonstrated that Moroccan Jewry was past its golden age, but fate always made a point of reminding me that there would forever be interest in maintaining its ancient legacy.