Out of Exile: The Evolution of Moroccan Jewishness

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Out of Exile: The Evolution of Moroccan Jewishness
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Table of contents

Acknowledgements  3
Abstract  3
Introduction  4
Literature review  4
Past: Jewish Legacies in Morocco  5
Present: Multiculturalism within Morocco  10
Who is the Moroccan Jew Today?  13
Methodology  14
Limitations  15
Findings  16
Essaouira as a research site  16
Bayt Dakira  16
The Jewish Cemetery  19
Judaica in the Streets  20
Speaking to visitors at the Cemetery and Bayt Dakira  20
Maya  21
Aviva  21
Bina  22
Amir  22
Academia around Jewish history: An interview with Professor Khalid Bensghir  22

Conclusion: Jewish Identity as a site of Struggle  25
Works Cited  29
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Abstract

Morocco once had the largest Jewish population of any Islamic country, but in 1948 the creation of the Israeli state drew Jews out of Morocco in massive numbers. Since then the Jews have a ghostly presence, spoken about but hardly seen. Curiously, the void left by their flight has been filled by a conscious effort on the part of Moroccan historical institutions to retain the presence of Jews in collective memory. Well maintained sites, and spaces such as the Jewish quarter that are linked to Jewish presence continue to contribute to a discourse which presents Moroccan and Jewish histories as intertwined. Further, the character of this history is represented as a happy symbiosis, and institutions which remember the Jews are nostalgic for this time of peaceful coexistence. This project investigates the active re-affirmation of the Jewish component in Essaouira, a city in Morocco with a large historical Jewish presence. This research brings to light the question of what it means for Morocco to be a multicultural society. And to what extent has the Moroccan Jew become a politicized Identity?

Introduction
“The Jews were here first. It was them and the Amazigh who lived on this land before the Arabs, before the Moors, before the French." This is what I was told when I first explained to the Moroccan family who was housing me, that I am of Jewish origins. As I continued in my time here, every mention of my Jewish background to people prompted a similar response: a history lesson, and the urgent affirmation of Morocco’s tradition of Jewish tolerance.

Once I started seeing it, I couldn't stop. Scattered clues into the Jewish presence started popping up everywhere: small plaques in the old medina commemorating what once was a synagogue, a star of David etched on a door, a grave marked with Hebrew. However, it always seemed like the trail of breadcrumbs led nowhere, as today native Moroccan Jewish people are few and far between. Without an active Jewish population, who is continuing to emphasize the Jewish component of Moroccan Identity, and why?

This line of questioning leads me to Essaouira, an artsy beach town along the southern coast of Morocco with one of the largest historical presence of Jews. In Essaouira I set out to see the ways in which Jewish history is being claimed, and get to know the institutions and people who are claiming it in order to get a fuller picture of what Jewishness means in Moroccan society today.

**Literature review**

Executing a truly comprehensive literature review would require far more time than this project allowed. There is a wide body of scholarship on the topic, exploring almost every niche you could imagine. As I moved forward in my research, I continued to uncover new sources which provided new levels of insight. However, for the sake of being focused I chose to break my review into three parts; the first explores Jewish legacies in Morocco, narrowing in on how Jews may have identified themselves with the broader society based on historical context. Next, I turn towards
theories of multiculturalism and the current relevant political context in Morocco. Finally, I briefly touch on works which start to unravel the specific complexity of Jewish Moroccan Identity. The aim in my organization and choice of sources is to provide appropriate exposition for my site visit to Essaouira. To track the ebbs and flows of exclusion and inclusion into larger society; shifting boundaries along which Jews distinguished between themselves, Jewish communities abroad, and the rest of society. Going into this history will help make clear how Jewish Identity is constructed now, hopefully complicating the idea of a primordial Jewish identity.

Past: Jewish Legacies in Morocco

The Jewish population in Morocco, going all the way back to the sixth century BCE, is diverse in origin and formed through a complicated process of migration and acculturation. Painting in the broadest possible strokes, the first wave was those pushed westward from the middle east by the wave of Islamic conquests (Gottreich 444). Next were the Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. Finally in the period leading up towards the French protectorate came a wave of Ashkenazi Jews who settled in hopes of broader acceptance and economic opportunities (Gottreich 444). Also, to be considered are the Amazigh Jews, who’s genesis: whether they came from Jewish people integrating into Amazigh communities, or Amazigh’s conversion to Judaism, is unclear (Gottreich 445). At its peak, the Jewish population was approximately 250,000-270,000 people living in mostly urban areas (Schroeter 146). However, a mass exodus after world war two with the creation of the Israeli state has dropped that number to less than 500 (Schroeter 146).

Jewishness in Morocco has never been a monolith, its sedimentary formation has distinct, sometimes conflicting layers. In the pre-colonial period, the various factions of Jews did not identify with each other. They differentiated themselves along the lines of language and diaspora.
Schroeter writes: “The Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews of northern Morocco disparagingly referred to the Arabic-speaking Jews of the interior as forasteros, ironically meaning ‘foreigners’ or ‘outsiders’ while the latter pejoratively called the former rumis, an Arabic term referring to European Christians but used by Moroccan Jews in reference to mego-rashim, the Hebrew term for the exiles from the Iberian Peninsula” (Schroeter 150). Thus, our retrospective understanding of Jewishness in Morocco should take into account these complicated modes of self-identification, which were linked to the culture and diaspora of the immediate communities.

Fez, the capital of Morocco up until the French made Rabat their administrative hub, was in many ways a seedbed for the complicated dynamics of Jewish acculturation, where the older and newer generations of Jews commingled to produce a distinct internal social system. The Sephartic Jews who came to settle in Fez, joined an older pre-existent Arabic speaking Jewish community (Schroeter 152). Class and diaspora shaped this convergence of cultures. The Sephartic Jews, more upper class were those who controlled the temples and the worship (Schroeter 154). This blend of cultures started to take its own new form, Schroeter writes: “This synthesis of Spanish and native culture, particularly evidenced in the realm of popular culture, from kabbalistic practices to food ways, produced, in the centuries following the expulsion, a distinctive cultural identity” (Schroeter 152). Thus, so far as we can understand, differences of diaspora within the Jewish community were relevant to social positioning, but came together to form a mosaic of culture which began to bleed across social factions.

While variations on identity may have been recognized within the community, to the outside the Jews were consolidated within neighborhoods specifically designated for them: the mellah. Fez was the site of Morocco’s first mellah created in 1438. Legend holds that the Sultan decreed the mellah in response to a massacre of the Jews (Schroeter 155). The real story is lost to
time, and we are left to fill in the gaps of whether it was an act of segregation or protection. Following, Marrakech, Essaouira, Rabat all instituted their own Mellah, and it became a common feature of every city (Schroeter 155). The mellah was not legally mandated, Jews could technically live anywhere in the city if they chose, and Muslims were permitted entry. More symbolic than practical it served to homogenize all factions of Jews as a separate entity from the rest of society.

This separation was exacerbated by the French, who’s colonial relationship with Morocco was officially set in place with the establishment of the protectorate in 1912. The French colonial strategy relies on the fact that it's easier to control an internally fragmented population. Their divide and rule approach manipulated the multifaceted nature of the Jewish community in such a way that they were further dissociated from their Arab Muslim neighbors. Firstly, the Sephardic Jews were linked to their European origins and thus exempt from the harsh Arab stereotyping that justified so much of the French’s invasive policy (Schroeter 150). As for the Arabic speaking Jews, the myth of Amazigh origins separated them from being associated with the Arabs: “The idea of ‘Berber Jews,’ constructed as more indigenous than Arab Muslims, suited French colonial ideas on racial, ethnic, and religious divisions that underscored their policy in Morocco”(Schroeter 150). Thus, with the various threads of Jewishness existing in Morocco, the French were able to weave an identity of Moroccan Jew as separate from the Arab Muslim population. This act of narrative authority linked the Jewish community by placing them in opposition to the Arab Muslim Majority.

This differential treatment only went as far as to create a rift between the Jews and the Muslims. No substantial policy was put into place to solidify these dynamics, such as in Algeria where the Jews were given French citizenship (Laskier 323). The resulting dynamic was further isolation of the Jewish community, who was still technically under the jurisdiction of the Makhzen.
This ostracization conceptually homogenized the Jewish population: Schroeter writes: “Moroccan Jewish identity became in the colonial period more narrowly defined than in the past; it became associated with the veneration of local saints, which greatly developed under French rule yet increasingly on a national scale” (Schroeter 158). The multiplicity of Jewishness in Morocco condensed them into an invisible pariah.

At the tail end of the colonial period, between 1948 and 1964, eighty eight percent of Morocco’s Jewish community re-settled in Israel (Laskier 323). The first round of immigration was illegal; opposed by both the French who wanted to control the movement of people (Laskier 323), and the Mahzak who feared that it was militarily motivated: that the Jews were going to take arms against Palistein (Laskier 325). But despite the pushback from the authorities, eventually it was clear that there was no stopping the migration. Perhaps the French realized that the Aliyah would spread French speaking and educated Jews thus expanding their influence (Laskier 329). They established a special immigration bureau in Casablanca which, in collaboration with Zionist organizations, facilitated the Aliyah that would eventually lead the vast majority of Jews out of Morocco (Laskier 329).

A series of factors converged to create this mass migration. First of all, the French relationship with the Jews treated them as separate from the Arab Muslim majority without bestowing them with any benefit. This left them confined both spatially within the crowded *mellahs* and economically to Jewish sectors of the economy (Laskier 325). Jewish hope for the future in Morocco had to conform itself to these conditions, leaving space for Zionist organizations to introduce the idea of Israel; Laskier writes, “Poverty in the urban and rural Jewish quarters (mellahs) became a weapon in the hands of the Mossad Aliyah and the Jewish Agency’s emissaries, for they could play on the frustrations of the poor who sought to ameliorate their
status.”(324). The void left by France and Morocco's treatment of the Jews could be filled by the promises of Israel as a space where Jewish Identity could stand alone.

Next a complicated political context, both within Morocco and abroad brought the situation to a point of violence. There were two incidents. The first was On June 7th, 1948, where pogroms in Oujda and Djerba, both cities bordering Algeria—a checkpoint for migratory Jews, caused forty three deaths, and destruction of Jewish homes and businesses. This violence, however, must be understood through a larger geopolitical lens. Following Israel's declaration of independence on May 14th 1948, was the immediate invasion by Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and (now) Jordan (Rabin and Begin). The programs fell at a time where the Arab Israeli war peaked in violence, and thus spurred a proportional anti-semitic sentiment in Morocco especially against Jews who were suspected of going to Israel and potentially joining the Haganah (Israeli Defense Forces)

The next documented incident was August 3rd, 1954, where in the town of Petit jeain seven Jews were massacred (Laskier 334). The compounded effects of the Israel Palestine conflict alongside the crescendoing Moroccan nationalist movement—which would win independence from the French in 1956—helps explain these anomalous events in what a nonviolent history is largely. Moroccan nationalism was not necessarily exclusionary to the Jews, on the contrary there were many cases where they were actively involved. Notably Abraham Serfaty a Marxist anti-French anti-Zionist Jew who suffered two decades of political imprisonment for his radical outspoken-ness against the French (Slyomovics 4). However, there were threads of Arab nationalism within the movement, which made the oppositional positioning of the Jewish minority by the French all the more dangerous (Laskier 323). Thus, the violence against Jews falling on the eve of the final break from the French likely draws upon the growing instability of Moroccan identity, both from the conflict abroad and within.
A zionist explanation of the exodus of the Jews from Morocco would view the pilgrimage to the holy land of Israel as self-evident. However, based on the complicated history I believe this narrative is not wholly sufficient in explaining the lack of a Jewish presence in Morocco today. Further evidence of this is the fact that Jews were not only headed to Israel, but fleeing elsewhere, “8994 North African Jews made their way—both legally and illegally—to Marseilles between May 1947 and 31 December 1948, the majority coming from Morocco"(Laskier 325). This suggests that the Jewish exodus was due to a series of compounded structural problems within Morocco. The majority going to Israel could perhaps be attributed to zionist organizations who were facilitating their paths and resettlement but drawing from the pre-existent conditions causing Jews to seek lives outside of Morocco.

Present: Multiculturalism within Morocco

Historically speaking, Moroccan Nationalism developed with the Islamic-Arabic identity as a central axis. This was officially ascribed in the former 1996 constitution which outlined Morocco as “An Islamic and fully sovereign state whose official language is Arabic” (Mkinsi). But in 2011, there was a change to the update that de-emphasized the Arab Islamic component in favor of a more inclusive definition of identity which mentions officially—for the first time—the Jewish Amazigh populations “Its unity, is forged by the convergence of its Arabo-Islamic, Amazigh and Saharan-Hassanic components, nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences.”(Mkinsi). This official rhetorical shift signaled a radical new conception of what Moroccan identity can look like.

I can think of two main perspectives for this shift towards the sudden embrace of a multicultural identity. Firstly, within Morocco there have been movements by minority groups—
particularly the Amazeigh—pushing for greater recognition, going back decades. Surely, not by coincidence, this constitutional change came directly in the wake of the Moroccan version of Arab spring, a movement across the Islamic world which called for an increase in individual rights and spoke out against corrupt governments (Mkinsim). The protests had a decentralized nature, largely propelled, and organized over social media platforms. This new, more democratic approach to activism, however, meant that the government was able to quell the uprisings quickly. Part of their appeasement being the surface level constitutional embrace of the minority groups who were calling for referendum (Mkinsi).

The adoption of Multiculturalism as a mean of softening the appearance of the government and redirecting criticism was identified by Stuart Hall; he writes: “Multiculturalism with its focus on cultural identity being understood by many, especially many on the Left, as a means of evading the difficult structural, economic, and political questions, posed by racism. (Hall). We can see this dynamic at play especially in the context of the Arab spring, where through adopting the appearance of openness, the government redirects criticism without actually having to make policy changes that would actually improve the living conditions of minorities.

This facet of multiculturalism, which in the hands of power can be used to diffuse rather than address the inequalities faced by minorities, is important when we consider the motives behind the new embrace of multicultural identity.

On an international level, in a post 911 world, in order to still align with western powers it's useful for Morocco to present themselves as open, and to de-emphasize Islam. By claiming a multicultural identity, Morocco appears to be more all embracing. In the case of Moroccan Jews they are still granted citizenship generations out from living on Moroccan soil. They can therefore act as spokespeople for Morocco, presenting a positive image to the world.
Thus the government's embrace of multiculturalism can be seen as bridging ideological divides both abroad and within the country (Mkinsim).

The historical presence of the Jewish minority in Morocco is a convenient vessel for the Moroccan myth of a multicultural society, “As the only non-Muslim indigenous group in Morocco, Jews become conceptually essential for imagining a more open progressive, civil society” (Schroeter 147). Because the Jews of Morocco are no longer here to speak for themselves, power structures can intervene with the narrative that suits their aims. Hall writes: “Identities and communities have become less ascriptive and more associational, that is to say, less anthropological and more political.” In the case of the Jewish population of Morocco, we see that through the various instruments of power there has been abstraction of Jewish identity from the actual people who were living in males trying to make lives for themselves, into a symbol serving the idea of Moroccan exceptionalism.

Additionally, the focus on Jewish identity feeds into a growing economic relationship with Israel. A recent increase in economic ties with Israel shows the transnational implications that multiplural identity holds. In late 2020 there was a US sponsored deal signed between Morocco and Israel to normalize relations. The trade volume between the two countries, which in 2021 was 131 million, consists of an exchange of exports including transportation products out of Israel, and textile and agricultural products from Morocco. Additionally, the tourist industry, now helped by a direct flight that started in August 2021 also brings in a large sum of money (Mukhtar). So both within the country, and outside, power benefits from the embrace of multiculturalism.

*Who is the Moroccan Jew Today?*
Taking a step back. When the Jews were present in Morocco, their sense of identity adjusted to their mellahization by the Sultan, then to the projections from French colonial power. Now once again Moroccan Jewish identity is being co-opted by power, presently being used as evidence of multiculturalism which smoothly aligns Morocco with foreign powers. The void left by the actual voices of Moroccan Jews leaves the question of what it means to be a Moroccan Jew.

Gottreich identifies the term Arab Jew, as one primarily used in cultural studies, and insofar as it is self-inscribed by individuals, one born out of exile. Using a dialogic understanding of identity, we see how layers of self are only revealed through the identification of an oppositional other. So when considering the Jew’s leaving Morocco, it is only through the otherness of their national identity in its new context that the identity of Moroccan Jew is formed. This can only happen however in a context where national identity is a relevant feature. So the term Moroccan Jew is both an exilic term, and a nationalist term, as Gottreich describes:” Current conceptualizations of the Arab Jew reveal a strong link not only between exile and personal identity but also between exile and national identity, a sentiment, not coincidentally, often felt most keenly at a distance” (Gottreich 436). Thus, the idea of a Moroccan Jew as a distinct and historical identity with specific meanings attached to it, is a projection into a present where the Jews no longer occupy Morocco.

Methodology

Put simply, my methodology revolves around the exploration of Essaouira. From everything I had heard, I knew it was the place to go in order to understand what Jewishness in Morocco can mean. And so, to Essaouira I went, not so much with a plan, but with a thread of curiosity that led me to build on my prior research through a collection of visual analysis, observation, and interviews. Eventually this excess of questions led me to what I would call a
special, visual, and interactive ethnography; or maybe just a collage of observations around the ways that Jewish legacies live themselves out through Essaouira.

My explorations started with walking around the streets of Essaouira. I took notes and pictures of the proliferation of Judaica I was noticing, and talked to shopkeepers, asking what they knew about the items and their connection to the history of Essaouira.

Next, I went to Bayt Dakira. First going through the museum as a visitor, reading and processing the information as presented. Then, attending to see how the museum is being occupied: observing who comes, when they move throughout the space. I returned multiple times, trying to see the museum at different points in the day and to get a feel for the types of people who were attending, noting the differences between Ramadan and non-Ramadan times. As well as trying to speak to different people attending. I took a similar approach with the Jewish cemetery, simply going to observe as carefully as possible. I only went once however, as I felt an ethical dilemma with being a voyeur in a space that is so religiously charged.

Personal interactions were also important in the formation of this piece. At Bayt Dakira and the Cemetery, I chatted with attendee’s—primarily Israeli tourists asking about their backgrounds and experience. Our conversations were quite informal, and brief, however I was able to get a good sense of their fresh reactions to the sites they were emerging from, and how they connected it to their backgrounds and specific identity. And finally, my interview with Professor Khalid Bensghir, gave a more holistic perspective on all the interactions and observations I had collected.

Limitations

Although I don’t believe you can ever remove the researcher from the research they produce, because my findings were largely observational as opposed to quantitative, my personal
voice in the presentation of my research is even more exaggerated. I do not claim any objectivity, my findings are, of course, confined to my perspective as a researcher. My positionality here is relevant. I am of Jewish origins but was raised adamantly secular. This means that I perhaps have a blind spot when it comes to recognizing the religious elements of Judaism that are relevant to this research.

My thin hold on Jewish identity did however give me more access to information, such as access to the Jewish cemetery, and the Israeli tourists seemed to soften when I told them I was Jewish, many exclaiming that I needed to visit Israel. However, I am an outsider looking in. Both in Morocco, and with the Moroccan Jews. Therefore, this whole research should be taken with a grain of salt, not as authoritative but as perhaps generative of new questions around the complicated subject of Jewishness in Morocco.

Additionally, some logistical problems should be noted as factors that limited my ability to collect information. Firstly, sample size: I was only able to speak to a few Moroccan Jews, vastly limiting my perspective on what is such a diverse experience. Second, the conversations were conducted in English, where Hebrew was their first language. Additionally, I conducted this research during Ramadan, so it was harder to set up interviews and get a hold of others within the community of Essaouira who would have broadened my perspective.

Findings

Essaouira as a research site

Mogador (Now Essaouira) was founded in 1764 on the site of an old Portuguese fort and became a prosperous trading and fishing port. The developing city attracted a large population of Jewish merchants, and with time as the Jewish population represented 40% of the city ("Old Jewish
Cemetery, Essaouira, Morocco | Archive | Diarna.org”). Today, the legacy of the Jewish presence is keenly felt. There is a well-maintained Jewish cemetery, commemorative plaques marking where synagogues used to stand, and most recently a museum entirely dedicated to the Jews of Essaouira: Bayt Dakira. This legacy, combined with the well-preserved historical sites is what drew me to Essaouira as a place where I could understand how Jewish narratives are being enacted in Morocco.

**Bayt Dakira**

Tucked away in Essaouira’s historic mellah, Bayt Dakira—translated to house of memories—has become the quiet engine of the reclamation of Essaouira’s Jewish history. First opened in 2020, Bayt Dakira is in its early years, but it has quickly become a popular site for tourists, both Jewish and otherwise, who come to uncover a nearly forgotten history. I was kindly allowed by the staff at Bayt Dakira to simply observe, being a fly on the wall and occasionally speaking to visitors as they came through.

Entrance is free at Bayt Dakira. From observation and discussion with staff there I surmised that most visitors are tourists, drawn in in big groups by tour guides, or from TripAdvisor itineraries which advertises it as one of the best (and only) museums to visit in Essaouira. The afternoons tend to be sleepy, but the mornings are packed with those trying to squeeze in their museum going time before lunch. In these peak hours, groups of upwards of 30 people wander through Bayt Dakiras small space—one main chamber with three adjoining display rooms—taking pictures and speaking in a myriad of languages: French, English, Spanish, Hebrew etc…. Tour guides tend to wait outside speaking darija amongst themselves.
When you first enter, on your right you will find a well maintained, but seeming unused, synagogue. Walk further into the main chamber and right at eyeline, framed by a stone, is a looped video of the King. He is shown inaugurating the museum, accompanied by his advisor André Azoulay, a Souiri Jew and one of the main proponents of Bayt Dakira. The two, are engaging with the grateful crowd at the inauguration; clasping hands with teary eyed Rabbi’s and clapping at celebratory musical performances. Aside from being the one of the first things you see, the reminder of the king’s endorsement is reaffirmed by photos of him, especially with André Azoulay sprinkled throughout the museum.

The museum primarily uses text, archived photos, and film, with some material artifacts such as Torah’s, musical instruments, clothing, and other remnants of the Jewish presence. The material trace of the Jewish presence is affirmed by Genealogies, family trees showing generations of Jewish families. Text panels showcase some of the most influential within the Souiri Jewish lines, both within Essaouira and abroad. For example, a minister of transportation from London, the first elected Jew in the history of the United States, and Rabbi Haim Pinto, one of the most venerated Jewish figures from Morocco. A film of choppy cut black and white archived footage shows Essaouira of the past, where people lead camels through cobbled streets, pour tea, and craft various goods. The different forms of media compound into a clear message: that there were once Jews in Essaouira, and the nature of their coexistence with the Muslim population was fruitful. Bayt Dakira proof of this coexistence, taking the Souiri Jews, “From myth to proven reality.”

Going further than simply noting the presence of Jews in Essaouira, the museum confers a nostalgic tone to this history, presenting a romanticized picture of the coexistence of Jews and Muslims. The poetic language in the introductory slides sets this tone immediately: “Listen. Do you hear them? Do you hear those children’s laughter that punctuates the starry night?...Jews and
Muslims invaded the streets and squares of Mogador, together, by the hundreds, by the thousands. Hearts are jubilant, houses open, tables generous and the neighbor’s kind.”. This idyllic image of cohabitation is presented as inseparable from the city; the motif of the omnipotent seagull is revisited to situate the memories in the sleepy beach vibe of Essaouira. Motionless on the beach the seagulls keep watch in the iridescent light. They listen attentively to the pulse of the city, the breath of the trade winds. They listen and they hear like a murmur, a whisper.” The language and presentation create a dreamy image of Essaouira as a space where the cohabitation of Jews and Muslims flourished.

As presented by the museum, this history should not be contained to the past, or even the space of Essaouira. Bayt Dakira asks that we use this past to imagine a greater future, one where people of different religions are able to live with as much respect and peace as the Jews and Muslims in Essaouira: “With optimism and an emphasis on the importance of this legacy it is imperative to remember that it was possible. It was possible to live together while remaining by myself. It was possible to crown the difference and to establish its respect as a rule of life. It was possible and if it was, it can be again.” The museum visitor is left with this final note of optimism, with the idea that Essaouira represents the essence of community which can reach across arbitrary boundaries of religion to the core of common humanity.

The Jewish Cemetery

The door of the Jewish cemetery is locked. I am told to knock by the two uniformed officers standing near the entrance. I knock and a man peer through a crack, he asks me a question in French, which, from my lack of response it's clear I don't understand. He points at me and says, “Jewish?”, I respond by pointing to myself and affirming, “Jewish.” He smiles and swings the door open for me.
First enter, and the handwashing station is to your right, then ahead the plot of old, slightly crumbling tombstones. The graveyard faces the Atlantic. The city wall encloses the space, but the sound of the ocean locates you. Sand fills the porous rock of the graves, but the Hebrew inscriptions are still legible. In the center of the tombs is a round gazebo-esc structure with a blue top. A plaque in Hebrew memorializes Rabbi Haim Pinto, Jacob Bibas, and David Benbaruk.

A group of visitors walk in a single file line through the gravestones to enter the sandy colored rounded structure. They file out just as another bus arrives, and the newcomers enter to wash their hands. Other characters occupying the space are the janitors meandering about, brushing sand off the graves and bleaching the white wall surrounding the plot itself. Additionally a staff of security guards and the bouncer at the entrance protect the border through which groups of people enter.

_Judaica in the Streets_

Throughout the old medina of Essaouira, specifically the historic Mellah, the narrow alleys are lined by vendors selling jewelry, antiques, leather, and other artisan goods molded to the bohemian taste of the particular Essaouira tourist. Although Essaouira has its own unique flavor, the main center recalls all the other touristy sections of old cities I have seen across Morocco. However, what sets Essaouira apart is how visible the Jewish component is just from walking around the streets. In every shop, alongside the typical array of antique looking jewelry and other paraphernalia, are Stars of David, Menorahs, Mezuzahs, and items bearing the hand of Fatima—a symbol shared by the Jewish and Muslim. From going shop to shop and asking shopkeepers about their Judaica, I found that some claimed they were carrying genuine relics of the Jewish population. However I was also told from others that the items were imported from Israel, and then sold to primarily Israeli tourists.
Speaking to visitors at the Cemetery and Bayt Dakira

From my visits at both Bayt Dakira, and the Cemetery I met the Israeli tourists, many of direct Moroccan Origin who were visiting the sites. I found myself warmly embraced by them, many of whom were very willing to talk to me—especially once I mentioned I was Jewish. From my conversations I was able to get a broad but limited idea of some of the connections immigrated Moroccan Jews still have to Morocco, and how visiting these sites reinforces them. I was given consent to share their stories for my project, but I will not use their real names here.

Maya

Maya (56) was born in Casablanca but lived in the Jewish quarter of Fez until she was ten when her family relocated to Israel. She remembers Morocco fondly and spoke of the Jewish and the Muslims living in harmony. Orna first sees herself as Israeli. When her parents first immigrated, they largely disconnected themselves from Morocco, making an effort to speak primarily Hebrew in the house. Therefore, Orna does not speak much darija, only a couple words here and there. Coming to Morocco feels more informative than nostalgic. For example, the food she has eaten is good, but not reminiscent of anything she ate growing up. The Moroccan food her family cooked, she explained, is specifically Moroccan Jewish with specific spices and cooking techniques. You can't find it here anymore, she laments.

Aviva

When she was 15, Aviva (55) left her home in Casablanca with her family to go to Israel. Although her family was very Zionist, and considered Israel their homeland, Arabic was still spoken in the house. Although not exactly Moroccan Darija, as she describes it’s a slightly different dialect, more of a synthesis of Arabic, French, and Hebrew. She had no real desire to
return to Morocco, the memories associated with her childhood in Morocco are not bad, but she feels she has a better quality of life in Israel. Her family, however, was curious to travel, see something different and learn more about her background. She expresses that this trip has surprised her, the places her tour has taken her have been quite nice compared to the Morocco she remembers, and the people have been friendly and welcoming.

Bina

The Morocco that Bina (Aviva’s Daughter, 22) has experienced has not been the one she expected to see. Instead, she tells me how nice everything has been, describing the beautiful places they have visited. Moreover, the way the people have embraced her has been beyond what she could have expected. She shared an antidote: her and her family went out for dinner to a crowded restaurant and were waiting for a table, the host asked where they were from and they said Israel, the host responded with so much enthusiasm, saying how the Jews had a special place in his heart, and immediately found them a table. This warm embrace and nice scenery have given her a good impression of Morocco. Although she views the experience as a vacation rather than feeling much of a connection to the land.

Amir

Amir (63) and I met outside the cemetery, where he was kind enough to explain to the bouncer my awkward presence there. He lights up when I say that I'm Jewish. I ask what brought him to Morocco, and he explains how it's the country of birth, how he left when he was 17 with his brother, after he proudly clarifies how his loyalty is first to Israel. This is his second time visiting Morocco, he came once when he was 30, he says he remembers going back to Fez, where
his father once worked as carpenter, and remembering every street. This time he brought his family, they aren't Moroccan, but he wanted them to see his origins.

_Academia around Jewish history: An interview with Professor Khalid Bensghir_

I got the chance to speak to Professor Khalid Bensghir, an established Moroccan historian and editor of the renowned history journal Hesperis. He firstly pointed me in the direction of a wealth of scholarship on exactly my topic—more than I could possibly read in the short time period of this project but helpful, nonetheless. I also got the chance to pick his brain, gaining a more rounded out view of the Jewish role in history, as well as an interesting perspective on the nature of Academia around Moroccan Jewishness. Although what I learned was not specific to Essaouira per-say, the information gives a better understanding of the context surrounding their specific manifestation there.

In the beginning of his career Professor Bensghir never thought he would deal with the Jewish dimension. He was working on a PhD on the topic of Anglo-Moroccan relations, and through his research in the British National Archives began to see how inextricable the Jews are in the development of economic history between Morocco and Europe. He found that Great Britain was the first European country to give protection to the Moroccan Jews, evidence of their value in the increasing trade relationship between Morocco and Europe, and the spark of an interest in Moroccan Jewishness that would become significant in his career.

Because of the linguistic, cultural barriers between Moroccans and Europe, the Jews were best positioned to conduct trade, largely interacting through transnational linkages to the Jewish communities in Europe, and speaking in Hebrew and French. The scholar DanieL Schroeter describes them as “Property of the sultan”, because of how their economic role earned them official
protection. This relationship to Europe, created a complicated position for the Jews within Morocco, as both integral to the economy, and associated with colonizing forces. Professor Bensghir urged me to consider the history in its wide variation depending on the specific conditions of the time: “For each period there are characteristics completely different from the other ones.” But overall, the pattern is derived from the fact that the Jewish population was (and is) an important link for Morocco abroad, thus both historically and presently they will be viewed based on varying diplomatic conditions.

The history of Scholarship on the Moroccan Jews is no exception from this pattern. In the beginning, it was only the Moroccan Jews themselves who were interested in their history, this took the form of unofficial historic research: each family tracing their own genealogy writing their own history. But progressively other Moroccans began to deal with the Jewish dimension in their thesis, however not without pushback. For Professor Bensghir, when he first started his research in the 1960’s, any work around the Jews was immediately connected to the Israeli Palestinian conflict, he had peers looking down on him for his involvement in the topic: “It was not easy, you could have problems if you worked in the Jewish dimension”.

But as the political context has shifted, so has the production of scholarship. Since Professor Bensghir began his career he has seen an increase in both the production and interest in works within the topic of Jewish studies. Take the scholar Susan Miller for example, “One of the most important scholars in the Jewish field.” The publishing of her PhD *Years of Glory* which dealt with the Moroccan Jews happened to fall directly after the Iranian revolution, thus there was a “Interest from the Americans and the French to know more how Muslims respond to non-Muslims.” Professor Bensghir works translating works like this from English to Arabic, or vice versa, a skill that fluctuates in demand based on interest at any given time.
I ask Professor Bensghir his opinion on the politicization of Jewish Identity, to which he responds: “We shouldn't have opinions, we should have evidence.”, and the evidence tells a complicated story. As he points out, on the one hand, today, Morocco has a sizable Jewish diaspora living in powerful western countries, therefore it's useful for Morocco to reclaim these histories for diplomatic purposes. However the connections that Jewish people have to Morocco are legitimate, as he points out, “Even during the French protectorate period, many Jews joined the force, they are just Moroccan.” These two dimensions of Jewish presence coexist with each other, but a historical perspective can help to see one from the other.

The Israel-Palestinian conflict continues to be a geopolitical dimension which affects the perception of Jews within Morocco. Drawing from the scholarship of Aomar boam, he describes how some young people today who are not having direct interaction with Jewish people have developed antisemitism from a conflation of all Jewish people with Zionism. He explains that from their perspectives” Jews are equivalent to Zionists who are killing Palestinians.” Through his teaching and scholarship, he hopes to have his students gain a greater understanding of the topic of Judaism, and to treat it like any other historical concept. He hates the word tolerance, and instead hopes for community: “These people born here, are Moroccan. The fact that they practice another religion is no problem.” He believes that education beyond higher academia could turn the tides of the rising antisemitism in Morocco, “If we want to solve this problem we have to introduce courses in primary and secondary schools.”

**Conclusion: Jewish Identity as a site of Struggle**

Retracing the history of Jews in Morocco, shows various periods where the boundaries of Jewish identity shift upon the axis of their ever-changing inclusion within Moroccan National identity. Spatially separated within Mellahs, and concentrated in port cities, the Jewish population
occupied a distinct role both culturally, existing in the porous but distinct neighborhoods, and economically, where they occupied specific sectors, significantly acting as international merchants. The nationalist movement and the creation of Israel marked a new period of Moroccan Jewishness—one defined by distance. After this period of stasis, where the Jewish population has now all but left Morocco, how can we understand the manifestations of Jewish legacies in Essaouira as a new chapter in this history.

Firstly, we must consider the political level. How, in connection to the recent constitutional renaissance Jews are being adopted within Moroccan nationalist identity. Bayt Dakira in part functions as a mechanism of incorporating Jews into the Moroccan imagined community. Hall writes: “Imagined communities always require systems of representation which give texture and contact to the civic abstractions of their institutions, and it is the types of identification and belongingness which do in fact cement national identities.” From my observations, I see Bayt Dakira as achieving this in two ways. Firstly, through claiming shared history, and providing a material basis to ground the idea of Jewish Muslim co-existence. And secondly through continually showing the king, thus providing proof of an institutional affirmation of Morocco’s acceptance of Jews. Through affirming the history and exemplifying the intended diplomacy, Bayt Dakira works towards constructing a more inclusive national identity.

The romanticization of the interconnectedness of Jews and Muslims, is also significant when we consider the complicated relationship between Morocco and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To summarize what is a complicated and actively unfolding dynamic: there was once a time when Morocco was a vocal proponent for the realization of a viable Palestinian state, and at this time it seemed that a relationship with Israel was completely out of the question (Rddad). However, through stating an intention to normalize ties with Israel, Morocco gained US
recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara (Anouar). Hence an enormous economic and territorial weight has been placed on this relationship. However, there are movements in civil society who see increased relationships with Israel as undermining of Morocco’s solidarity with Palestinians.

Bayt Dakira, and its connection to increasing Israeli tourists and Jewish pilgrimages helps smooth over these jagged edges, both by strengthening the ties of Israelis to Morocco, and facilitating interactions through the notion of a shared history. Bayt Dakira can still claim to be acting in support of the Palestinian cause through promoting the image of peace between Jews and Muslims, while still actively contributing to the normalization of ties with Israel. André Azoulay, alongside being one of the founders of Bayt Dakira, has been a proponent for peace to be reached in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "The Mediterranean cannot exist without Palestine. The Mediterranean was not born to accept being mutilated by the isolation of one its people, the Palestinian people". Through the language and space of Bayt Dakira there is a message of optimism, a vision for a future where Jews and Muslims can share space, and culture.

However, the history of Jews in Morocco stretches far before the state of Israel, and the genocide of the Palestinians. By showing Jewish people within a Moroccan context, Bayt Dakira undermines the rising tide of prejudice within Morocco that attaches all Jews to Zionism. Moroccan Judaism in Morocco that was not directly connected to Israel, or a political agenda. Although the increasing relationship between Morocco and Israel played a role in more easily facilitating their journey—a new direct flight from Tel Aviv—there was still a sense of homegoing mixed in with a curiosity to see the land their parents came from. Jewish cemetery/grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto was a good example of this to me, a sacred space which has remained a pilgrimage cite despite any geopolitical dynamics.
Part of the Arab world yet located miles away from the site of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Morocco is in a unique position. Is Bayt Dakira, a symbol of peace, or simply a deflection from taking a more radical stance on Palestinian liberation? Are there legitimate reasons to be positive for the future, or does it all come down to economics and politics? Jewish identity in Morocco has become charged with these larger political questions. But perhaps through its claim to a blended national identity, Morocco can live up to its stated ideals of coexistence and be a catalyst for more interfaith dialogue.
Works Cited


