

Morocco: Recovering Treasures We Hadn't Known We'd Lost  
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The last full day of our journey through Morocco, we were seated in Beth El Synagogue in Casablanca at 4 pm on a Friday preparing for a Shabbat service. I was standing before the embroidered ark curtains, when the air was suddenly filled with the Arabic chanting of meuzzins (Muslim *hazzanim*, or cantors).

I said, "*Barchu* is our call to prayer. We will have a moment of silence during the Muslim call to prayer, and then we will rise for the *Barchu*."

As soon as the deep intonations stopped resonating from the minarets, we rose and began our service. Our voices, the two languages, Hebrew and Arabic, our faiths, at the moment, seemed to blend seamlessly, and at once we felt our own spirits embroidered into the beautiful, rich tapestry of Jews, Muslims and Berbers who defined Moroccan culture.

Later that evening, after our dinner at Rick's Café, I walked past a man wearing a cream colored *jelaba* (hooded kaftan/robe) who was pushing a cart full of roses. "*Jameel jadeen*," I said, "Very pretty." One of the Arabic phrases I had picked up living in Israel for two years. He smiled from ear to ear and pulled out an orange rose.

"Moroccan roses," he said proudly, handing it to me. Our tour guide Ibrahim had told us that Moroccans like to talk about the time Hillary Clinton ordered roses from Morocco for her daughter Chelsea's wedding, saying, "A nice Christian girl marrying a nice Jewish boy under a canopy of Muslim roses!" For Moroccans, it was a symbol of tolerance, honor and respect.

We knew that Morocco would be an exotic, exciting journey, but we did not know how far Morocco would exceed our expectations as a *Jewish* trip. Amidst with the dizzying textures and colors of the kasbahs (fortresses), the labyrinthine passages of the medinas (old walled cities), stalls teeming with spices, dates, olives, fabrics, antiques and all kinds of goods and handicrafts of the souks (markets), the fountains bubbling with water and rose petals in the centers of the riyaads (courtyards) which opened every home to the sky, we were surprised to encounter revelation upon revelation about our own Jewish heritage.

When we visit Israel or Eastern Europe as American Jews, it is profoundly meaningful to encounter the very places we have heard so much about. To walk the terrain of our ancestors. It is exciting to have the stories we have known all of our lives becoming real.

Visiting Morocco as American Jews is different, because most of us don't actually know the stories. Rather than feeling like pilgrims to our holy sites, we become more like investigative reporters. The people and the land teaches us as we go, returning to us treasures we hadn't even known we'd lost. Suddenly, our own texts and holidays take on new, enlightened dimensions.

The preamble to Morocco's Declaration of Independence reads: *[The Kingdom of Morocco]'s unity, which is built on the convergence of its Arab-Islamic, Amazigh and Sahara-Hassani components, is nurtured and enriched by African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean constituents.*

Jews are a foundational part of Moroccan culture. There is little to no Christian presence in Morocco, due to a deep mistrust of Christianity since the Inquisition. Jews have been part of Morocco since the year 71 BC. In fact, many Berbers converted to Judaism long before Islam came to the land.

There were traces of Jewish fingerprints everywhere. At one time, the artisans of Morocco had all been Jews. Jews didn't have land upon which to herd animals or from which to take resources. Instead, they made their living through handicrafts including silverwork, sewing, leatherwork, pottery, jewelry, baking. Jews were the spice men, blacksmiths, and painters. The special meringue cookies sold in the medina were Jewish recipes. We visited tanneries, weavers, metal workers, pharmacists, and learned about these ancient arts. We visited the world's oldest University, which is in Fez, in which Maimonides taught, and visited Maimonides' house in the center of the *souk*.

Exploring an ancient culture also provides clues as to unlocking our own origins. For example, it looked like there were *tallitot* everywhere. Every alcove selling garments had rows and rows of striped, fringed shawls. The Passover concept of *karpas* (Greek for "appetizer") made sense as every meal luxuriously began with a dozen small bowls of cooked vegetables to be dipped. The Muslim butchers were serious men, the only merchants who were adamant about not having their pictures taken. Every time a donkey bearing its master's goods was driven through the tight streets of the old cities, we would hear the driver shouting, "*Balak! Balak!*" which simply means "Watch out!" but hearkened to me to the biblical story of the talking donkey who crushed his master's foot while trying to avoid an angel in their path to do the Moabite King Balak's bidding. The markets made me think of all the Talmudic laws about buying and selling, designed for exactly these market communities. For example, the Talmud prohibits asking a shopkeeper the price of an item that you have no intention of buying. It doesn't feel bad asking the price of an object at the GAP, however, in these markets where men and women are giving their hearts to earn every *dirham*, it matters. Talmud says that to engage a shopkeeper when you don't intend to buy is like stealing their mind, and indeed they invest so much of themselves in each sale, it makes sense. Stories about Moroccan kings made me think of Talmudic laws about how one should stop whatever one is doing, even if it is reading from the Torah, in order to greet a king.

The Torah portion the week we were there (*VaYikra*) talked of various sacrifices. In Leviticus 1:17 we read: *He shall rend it by its wings...* and remembered taking a cooking class one afternoon, and picking out the live chickens we would cook later, watching the butcher rend it by its wings. In the Torah portion (Leviticus 2:1) we read: *A soul who shall offer a meal offering to God...* and read Rashi's comment on the verse which reads: *Why is the meal offering distinguished in that the expression "soul" is used? Because G-d says: "Who is it that usually brings a meal offering? It is the poor man. I account it as though he had offered his own soul to Me."* We thought of the many Moroccans who praised their king, calling him "The King of the Poor" for what he has done for them. It was clear that no matter what the Torah portion, in the context of our journey, the text was breathed newly to life.

And then there were the Jewish cemeteries.

We visited two Jewish cemeteries, one in Fez and one in Marrakesh. We learned that of the 10,000 holy people buried in Morocco, over 650 are Jewish *tsaddikim*, people who are recognized by both Jews and Muslims as saints. Each has a particular miracle associated with him or her. And many of these graves are frequented by Muslims praying for help in their lives. Thirty-six of the graves are said by kabbalists to be graves of *lamed-vavnikim*, the thirty-six righteous souls believed to hold up the world.

We visited the grave of Rabbi Pinchas Cohen about whom legend says he had a dream that the *pasha* (governor) was going to be assassinated at the Grand Mosque the next day. He told him and the *pasha* had someone dress like himself and go to the Grand Mosque in his place. Indeed, the avatar was assassinated. The story made us think of other Jews and their legendary dreams and dream interpretations, Joseph and Daniel. We thought of Mortichai reporting the assassination scheme to King Ahasuerus.

We visited the grave of an anonymous Jew who had scales carved into his headstone. The legend was that there was a drought, and the King asked that the most righteous man in all the land be found to pray for rain. They found this Jewish grocer. The grocer lifted his scales to the sky and said that he had never cheated anyone with the scales in the market, and by his merit, let there be rain, and there was. Some of us touched his grave and asked for some help in Southern California.

We visited the grave of a 17 year old woman named [Sulika](#), considered Morocco's Jewish Joan of Arc. She had been very beautiful, and many wanted to marry her. Some versions of her story say that a rumor had spread that she had converted to Islam, which she denied. The rumor was possibly started by someone who had been attracted to her perilous beauty and wanted her to convert in order to marry her. To denounce Islam after having converted was punishable by death. She was arrested and asked many times under extreme duress to proclaim her faith in Islam, but she refused. She was burdened with chains. Arab families came to her offering her wealth and marriage to convert and she refused. Some say that the Sultan himself offered her the throne at his side if she converted and she refused. Even the rabbis came to her, for fear that if she didn't convert, it might mean trouble for the Jews.

On the side of her cemetery shrine is a story behind glass which says that the rabbis told her, "My daughter, behold, Esther the Queen was married to Ahasuerus and through her act came a great salvation to the Jewish people."

"Honored Rabbi", replied Sulika, "While correct that Esther married Ahasuerus, however, Esther was never required to betray Hashem, the God of Israel. It is actually stated explicitly in the Book of Esther, 'Esther did not disclose her nation nor her birthplace,' but I," Sulika burst into uncontrollable tears, "am being forced to betray my People and my God. This shall never come to pass. I am willing to die on the Sanctification of God's Holy Name, so long as I am able to remain a Jew!"

On her grave it is written that this saintly child is bewailed by all the world.

It was meaningful, although coincidental, that our trip was in the days leading up to Purim. Purim is about masks and hiddenness. In fact, the name Esther means "Hidden One." Legend says that hidden in the arch as one enters the Jewish quarter in Marakkesh there are hidden amulets and jars of oil from Sefad to protect them.

Morocco itself has a kind of hiddenness. The landscape is snaked with high Andalusian walls and adobe style fortresses. The older homes have no windows, only a small door. However, walk through that humble door and behind those nondescript walls there is a visual eruption of patterned tiles, and the center of each home has no ceiling, so that the house opens at the top and breathes to the sky. There is a fountain in the center filled with water and often rose petals.

The men and women also are often hidden somewhat. Very few women wear full burkas, and many who do are from other countries like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. Often the women wear headscarves, paired with jeans and high heels. The men often wear long robes, *kaftans* and *jelabas*, with their colorful leather slippers peeking out.

How could we not think of Purim when we visited the palace of the grand vizier, and saw the courtyard flanked by all the rooms for his concubines, imagining Esther in a similar room? Or when our guide told us that three times a king turned against the Jews, and each time it was for personal reasons. For example, when the Jewish financial advisor prevented any more funds to be loaned to a very spoiled crown prince, that petulant crowned prince vowed to take it out on the Jews when he became king. Similar to Haman being insulted by one man, Mordichai.

We saw the very special *megilla* in a Jewish Museum called *Megillat Hitler*. We learned that the Jews of Morocco at the time did not know who Hitler was. They only knew that he was worse than Haman. They did, however, know how bad the King of Portugal Don Sebastian was. He wanted to invade Morocco and had vowed to annihilate the Jews for helping the Moroccans to build their ships. On Purim, every time they said the name "Haman," they would also add the names "Don Sebastian" and "Hitler."

The concept of a "Court Jew" also became clearer to us on our trip. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there were many tribal divisions in the land. There were over 60 Berber tribes and 50 Arab tribes. However, Jews were neutral in all these wars. Because they were neutral, they could travel between all tribes. They were the glue. All the villages depended on and trusted the Jews.

At the time, Jews had total trust of the kings. The Jews were the only people that kings didn't fear overthrowing him. They were the only group he trusted not to rise up against him. Therefore, Jews were trusted to run the mint and to store gun powder and to be their physicians. They managed the king's salt mines, which is why their quarter was called *malach* which means "salt." They were the counselors for financial affairs. Even today, the main financial advisor of King is Jewish.

How could we not think of Exodus 1:8, *Then a new king who knew not Joseph came to power in Egypt.*

We visited three synagogues on our journey. There are approximately 3000 Jews left in Morocco today. But their influence could be felt throughout the land. For a more comprehensive article about Jewish Morocco, and one that was not written nearly as quickly, please see Michael Frank's article in the New York Times, [\*In Morocco, Exploring Remnants of Jewish History.\*](#)

In a world of increasing divide, it was a blessing to delve deep into an ancient/modern culture, uncovering a wellspring of treasured shared history to quench our thirsty souls.