

A King's Gift to Moroccan Jewry

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King Mohammed VI of Morocco

Moroccan Jewry - A Brief History

Jewish communities have existed in Morocco since as early as 70 CE. It was during the end of the Second Temple era when the first group of Jews moved to North Africa, and a second large wave of migration from the Iberian Peninsula occurred in the period leading up to and following the Spanish Inquisition in 1492.

For many centuries, the Jews and Muslims in Morocco enjoyed, what was for the most part, a peaceful coexistence. The juxtaposition of the two cultures is believed to be largely responsible for the numerous similarities between Moroccan Jews and Muslims.

But while the Jewish communities were generally safe, there were also periods when the Moroccan Kingdom vigorously enforced the laws pertaining to the second class *dhimmi*¹ status of its Jewish citizens. Urban Jews were forced to live in ghettos called *mellahs*, a name derived from the Arabic word for salt. Muslims in these periods would force Jews to salt the heads of executed prisoners before their public display, and thus the urban Jewish quarters became known by this name. As it turned out, the Jews only benefited from this policy of segregation. Living apart enabled them to practice their religion more freely without the interference of troublesome neighbors. It also minimized, to a large extent, the level of anti-Semitism, as the saying goes, "out of sight, out of mind."

The Moroccan monarchy established a unique relationship with this essential, *dhimmi* minority, one which remained in place even until recent times. In fact, during World War II, King Muhammad V refused to implement the anti-Semitic laws imposed upon his province by the Nazi controlled Vichy regime in France that ruled parts of Morocco at that time.

¹ The Arabic word "dhimmi" literally means "protected citizen." The formal status of dhimmi to which Jews in Muslim lands were assigned was an official and legalized state of second class citizenship.

Morocco and the State of Israel

Upon becoming an independent state in 1948, Israel followed a periphery doctrine in its foreign affairs, seeking ties with regional countries – including Morocco – that were on the margins of the ongoing conflict with its Arab Neighbors. In the years following their independence, both Israel and Morocco needed Western assistance to deal with domestic challenges and foreign threats, especially communism and pan-Arabism. Therefore, for many years, Jerusalem and Rabat developed a strong secret relationship in three areas: emigration, intelligence and diplomacy.

Moroccan-Israeli ties further strengthened in 1959-1960, and then even more so upon the crowning of King Hassan II in 1961. The Mossad (Israel's foreign intelligence agency) offered to train Morocco's royal bodyguards, and Israel was also involved in training some of the kingdom's intelligence services, which was regarded as largely disorganized at the time. Over the years, this secret connection between the two countries continued to thrive, and Israel remained active in supplying Morocco with weapons and intelligence. In the late 1950's, King Hassan II shocked the Arab world during a visit in Lebanon when he publicly argued that the only solution for the enduring conflict was to make peace and incorporate Israel in the Arab League.

The ties between the two nations have proved exceptionally profitable for both populations. Economic trade between Morocco and Israel is today estimated at \$100 million a year. Few people are aware of this special bond between the Jewish State and its Arab ally.

In the early twentieth century, Moroccan Jews held prominent positions in the royal government of Morocco and enjoyed respect and admiration. Even today, Jews continue to play a notable role in Morocco; in fact, the king retains a Jewish senior advisor, a position presently filled by Andre Azoulay.