

# From the Mellah in Marrakesh to Israel and back

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## Introduction

Israel is perceived to be the “promised land” of Jews from all over the world. Hence, Israel has become a multi-cultural society, which demonstrates an unexpected richness and diversity of ethnic groups and a wide range of different voices and cultural traditions (Mautner 2011). One of the visible and material manifestations of this social phenomenon is the emergence and presence of associations, heritage centers, and ethnic museums that represent various ethnic Jewish communities that immigrated to Israel (Kark and Perry 2012). These multiple ways to preserve local heritage are considered, in Nora’s (1993) terms, as *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory) that are striving to tell the cultural narratives of communities. Thus, the process of heritage construction reinforces the presence of identities, values, and relationships in the public sphere. In other words, the “heritage work” done by the various heritage centers is putting symbolic assets on display in order to provide focal points for the construction and reformulation of the group’s cultural heritage. My father was one of these cultural workers. He immigrated to Israel during the 1950s at the age of fifteen, from his hometown of Marrakesh, Morocco, and the streets of the *Mellah* (Arabic for the old Jewish Quarter).<sup>1</sup> In 1985 he founded *The Marrakesh Jewish Association in Israel* (the Association). The Association’s aim was to preserve and represent the heritage of the Marrakesh Jewish community in Israel.

Following the journey of the Jewish community of Marrakesh in space and time, this study analyses the process of heritage building of this ethnic community through one of the main activities of the Association – the yearly conference, and especially the tenth conference called *Journey to Our Past in Marrakesh*, which was held in 1995. The event wished to collect the dispersed community members from their places of residence, mainly in the periphery of Israel, and reunite them in the imaginary streets of the Mellah that were rebuilt in HaYarkon Park, one of the main public spaces in Tel Aviv. To analyze the *Journey to Our Past in Marrakesh*, I conducted an autoethnography by using both text and visual analysis of the Association’s

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1 The *Mellah* is the name of the Jewish quarter in Marrakesh, Morocco.

documents and photographs, as well as in-depth interviews with the Association's founders and a diary I kept during my family's "roots trip" to Marrakesh. I used these resources to create three heritage maps of the journey from the Mellah to Israel and back, in order to visualize the cultural path that the Marrakesh community members constructed in their re-gathering. These maps will shed light on the community's heritage journey within the dominant Zionist heritage in Israel, and on the possible ways that traditional heritage can be preserved and even shared with different ethnic groups.

## The Jews of Marrakesh and the immigration to Israel

Marrakesh is one of the five capital cities of Morocco. Today it is the second largest city, with a population of about two million people. The city was founded in 1070 and was known as the "Red City", or "Red Marrakesh", owing to the deep pink hue of its Medina's (city in Arabic) walls and buildings. The city's natural landscape displays a rare contrast, combining a desert character and the hundreds of thousands of palm trees that surround it, with the Atlas Mountains with their snow-capped peaks to the south and the Jbilet hills to the north. This combination gives the city a rare beauty at any hour of the day.

Marrakesh comprises an old, fortified city, surrounded by a wall with a well-preserved gate. The Medina quarter, which is part of the old city, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its traditional marketplace – Jemaa el-Fnaa – and the old Jewish Quarter, the Mellah. West of the Medina is the Ville Nouvelle's, the Hivernage and Gueliz neighborhoods, built in the early 20th century during the French Protectorate in Morocco.

Jews have come to Marrakesh since its founding in 1062. The Jews came to Morocco in two major waves. The first is commonly linked with the destruction of the Temple (586 BC) (Bar-Asher 1976). Most of the Jews settled in rural areas, especially in the southern parts of Morocco, in the mountainous Atlas region, where they had close and prolonged interaction with the Amazigh (Berber) groups, who had also settled there before the Arabs (Toledano 1984). The second wave came when Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, after the Inquisition at the end of the fifteenth century (1391–1492). These *Meghorachim* (Hebrew for expelled) were able to come to Morocco thanks to the contacts they maintained with the Portuguese, who were established in the coastal areas. The Meghorachim began to live in the area, working in occupations such as finance and commerce, which were proscribed by Islam to Muslims (Cardeira da Silva 2018).

Communal life, for hundreds of years, blurred the distinctions between the two groups. The only thing that distinguished between them was their family names. For example, Biton, Vaknin, Abitbol, Darai etc, were common names of the "inhab-

itants". Rozilio, Pinto, Dhaloya, Kourkus, and Kabsa, were typical family names of the "exiled". Additional differences were found in the ritual slaughter and in the text of the *Ketubah*<sup>2</sup> (Hebrew for a Jewish marriage contract). Until a relatively later period, the community's leadership and Rabbis were descendants of the exiled (Pinto, Azoulai, Kourkus, Rozilio).

The Jewish community of Marrakesh was one of the largest communities in Morocco, and Marrakesh was a spiritual and cultural center for the country's inhabitants, who were spread across the Atlas Mountains, at the edges of the Sahara, and in the coastal cities. Thus, cases that were too difficult for rural judges were brought before the judges of Marrakesh. Youths from rural villages came to study at the yeshivot of Marrakesh. The city was also the center for learning the ritual slaughter and getting the "official" certification to work in this profession. Marrakesh was also the only economic center for villagers and city dwellers. In prosperous times, the Jews enjoyed economic profit and governmental protection, and a small minority were even employed as translators, advisors, and diplomats. In times of anarchy and changes of government, the Jews suffered from persecution, theft, looting, and murder.

"Of all the Mellah present in each of the cities of Morocco, the Mellah of Marrakesh is the most important", said Périgny (1918, p. 137). Within the Medina – the Old City of Marrakesh – an area between the Bahia Palace and the Royal Palace, is the Jewish quarter of the city. The walled Jewish quarter of Marrakesh was called the *Mellah*, originally referring to the salty marsh area to which the Jews of northern Morocco had been transferred. The Jews of Marrakesh were transferred to their new quarter during the reign of the Sa'di dyn (1511–1659). Based on the Jews of Marrakesh's oral tradition, scholars date the creation of the Mellah to the year 1557. It was a kind of closed ghetto, built to protect them. The status of the Jews was that of protégés. The usual explanation of the phenomenon of *Mellahization* in Morocco is that keeping the Jews within proximity to the Kasbah made it easier for the sultan, who was the patron of the Jews, to protect them from aggressors, while allowing the *makhzan* (Arabic for royal administration) taxation and control. The patronage was in accordance with religious law: in return for a poll tax the Jews were entitled to physical security, religious autonomy, and fair trial (Gottreich 2003).

During the 16th century, the Mellah had its own fountains, gardens, synagogues, and markets. Until the arrival of the French in 1912, Jews could not own property outside of the Mellah. Therefore, the growth was within the limits of the neighborhood, resulting in narrow streets, small shops, and taller residential buildings. The Slat al-Azama Synagogue (or Lazama Synagogue), built around a central courtyard, is within the Medina in the Mellah. On land adjacent to the Mellah is the Jewish cemetery which is the largest of its kind in Morocco, characterized by white-washed tombs and sandy graves.

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2 This refers to *Ketubah* in the Castile custom and *ketubah* in the regional custom.

Most of the Jews were artisans, financiers, moneylenders, gold and silversmiths, tailors, metalworkers, sugar traders, and peddlers. In the nineteenth century, the Jewish population, which focused on its synagogue, ritual baths, schools, and courts of law, was strengthened by a constant flow of Jewish craftsmen, including bankers, jewelers, embroiderers, and musicians, pilgrims visiting saints' graves, rabbinical students, and Jews from Palestine/Eretz-Israel (mandatory Palestine) seeking donations.

Although the majority of the Mellah population were Jews, the Mellah was not a Jewish ghetto and never quite achieved the ideal of an exclusively Jewish space, also serving as a quarter for non-Muslims. In the late nineteenth century, the Mellah provided place to people from Fez to Atlas villagers, to Christians from mainly Holland and Britain, and to Iberian Catholics who had their own sector. Muslims also had a large presence in the Mellah. The Mellah did not isolate Jews but facilitated their interactions with the sultan and his entourage, with the Muslims of Marrakesh, and with Jews and Muslims residing in the surrounding region. Roeme and Bar Cochba write:

What, in essence, is the Mellah? Some describe it as a 'ghetto', and some describe it as a 'Jewish quarter'. Those of my generation, and myself, can testify that it was a 'greenhouse', a place where no foreigner could bother us when we played in the street or when we walked to school. A kind of well protected womb where our parents were waiting for us, the children, in homes that were warmed with love (2006, p. 15).

These kinds of descriptions of positive childhood memories, innocent, full, and embracing, are familiar to me from my father's stories, and are repeated in many conversations with acquaintances, uncles, and aunts.

In 2015, I travelled to Morocco with my father and mother and all my siblings, for a "roots trip". In the past, tens of thousands of Jews lived in the Mellah; today there are about ten Jewish families. In the past the Mellah was conserved and clean; today the streets of the Mellah are narrow and neglected and the homes are extremely densely situated. The streets that once bore Hebrew names now bear new names that do not hint at the area's Jewish history. But even in 2015, many locals knew the Hebrew Street names. In the diary I kept on the journey in Morocco I wrote:

We are walking along Torah Study Road on our way to the Lo Azama Synagogue (the synagogue of the exiled), which is 500 years old and is the only surviving synagogue of the many that were here in the past. We pass through the iron gate from the narrow alley with its red walls to a new and unexpected space: a large, clean, and bright courtyard, with walls painted white and blue, surrounded all around with rooms, leading to the synagogue. In the past, the courtyard of the synagogue was home to a large yeshiva. Thousands of students came to study

and live in this complex. The Morning Prayer was held five times. The yeshiva no longer exists and in the rooms that once housed the students, now live the few elderlies and poor that the community support. A minyan<sup>3</sup> still assembles every once in a while, for prayer, keeping the embers of the community's glorious past burning. An even more exciting moment was the walk through the streets of the Mellah, between the narrow alleyways, on the way to my father's house. There he passed his childhood until the age of 15. My father feels totally at home, walking first with a wide grin on his face, on steady feet, talking, and joking with the passersby on the way to the house and place of business of his father (my grandfather), who was a merchant and owned a truck. The surviving yard of the packaging plant is used today as private residential housing (Kenan 2015). (Fig. 1, 2)

Shosh Roeme adds:

Many entrances and exits to our Mellah from the outside world were bustling with Muslims, Christians, or members of Jewish families that were well-to-do compared to us. [...] At every entrance to the Jewish quarter was a heavy door that locked from the inside with a giant latch I very much loved to debate, at length, with the Muslim guard on my way, who could guess when and how the Jews were preparing to leave their homes and emigrate to Israel (Roeme and Bar Cochba 2006, p. 15).

By the first years of the 20th century, Jews began a steady exodus from the Marrakesh Mellah to France and to North America and Israel. At the time of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, there were close to a quarter of a million Jews living in Morocco. The majority of them chose to immigrate to Israel (Bashan 2000). The first wave of immigration took place between 1948 to 1956. Thousands of Jews began to leave Morocco illegally with the help of the Israeli security services following the bloody incidents in Jerada and Oujda in 1948. Moroccan Jews and Muslims remember this event as full of tragic moments. From the day the State of Israel was established in 1948 until Morocco declared its independence in 1956, some 85,623 Jews immigrated to Israel from Morocco (ibid). In November 1951 the Israeli government and Jewish Agency decided to institute a selection policy for the Jews of Tunisia and Morocco, which allowed only families that could be self-sufficient to come to Israel (Picard 2013). On behalf of the Israeli Health Ministry, doctors were sent to those countries to implement the selection policy.

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3 *Minyan* means a group of at least ten worshippers, the minimal number allowing public prayer in Judaism.

*Fig. 1: In the alleys of the Mellah of Marrakesh (Photo: Gil Kenan)*



*Fig. 2: The author's father in front of his childhood home (Photo: Gil Kenan)*



In 1955, with the declaration of independence in Morocco and with the threat hovering over its Jewish population beginning to grow, the Jewish Agency allowed only 3,000 immigrants from Morocco per month to enter Israel. The second wave took place between 1956 and 1961. In March of 1956, immigration of Moroccan Jews to Israel was prohibited, and in September of 1956, the *Misgeret* (Hebrew for framework), a Jewish underground organization, began organizing the secret immigration of Moroccan Jews, which was a very risky undertaking. The most traumatic event of this time-period was the tragedy of the illegal immigrant ship the *Egoz*, which sank on its voyage, on the night of January 10, 1961. On board were 43 immigrants and Chaim Tsarfati from the Mossad (Black and Morris 2012). The third wave began in 1961 and ended in 1964. This wave started when king Mohammed V allowed Jews to leave under a collective passport. From then till 1964, some 97,005 Jews left Morocco with the tacit agreement of the Moroccan authorities. Under this agreement, Israel paid 50\$ for each immigrant. Since the establishment of the State of Israel until today, close to a quarter of a million Jews have immigrated from Morocco, the largest number of Jews who immigrated from a Muslim country (Cardeira da Silva 2018).

### **Dispersal of Moroccan and Marrakesh Jews in the periphery of Israel**

The Moroccan Jews were asked to settle in the newborn state of Israel in areas along the border from where their “co-ethnic” Palestinian Arabs had been expelled. This was just one of the many factors that contributed to their discontent with the conditions of their reception in Israel. This made integration difficult, thereby increasing their part in Israel’s “ethnic problem” and demographic anxiety (Tsur 1997). While in Morocco these Jews had belonged to the largest Jewish community within an Arab State, in Israel they joined the larger group of “oriental Jews” or Mizrahim – Jews who immigrated from Muslim and Arabs countries – as opposed to the dominant group of Ashkenazim – Jews who immigrated from European countries (Shenhav 2006).

In light of the “population dispersal” plan, which was implemented in the first decade of the state of Israel, a significant portion of the Moroccan immigrants were sent to settlements near the Israeli borders, in rural and peripheral areas. The name given to this immigrant absorption policy was “from the Ship to the Village” (Picard 2013). In the beginning, the immigrants were housed in the abandoned houses left by their Arab inhabitants, and afterwards they were relocated to *maabarot* (Hebrew for transition camps). The population dispersal policy relied on the new immigrants’ dependence on government and Jewish Agency resources. The Jews of North Africa were sent to the remote areas without being given any other choice. An efficient absorption apparatus enabled organizers to bring immigrants, on the day of their ar-

rival to Israel, to their permanent places of residence in faraway settlements (Tzfadia 2000). While a small portion of immigrants came from Morocco with an agricultural background, the majority were accustomed to an urban lifestyle and had trouble adjusting to agricultural life. Dependency prevented them from leaving, and when the goal of population dispersal was achieved, the level of investment in the periphery dropped (Yiftachel 2000). The immigrants from Morocco established 111 settlements in the Negev desert, the Galil mountains, and throughout the land of Israel. Some of these settlements were defensive human barriers that strengthened the northern and southern borders of the state. Despite their contribution to the nation, Moroccan immigrants did not take part in the Ashkenazi pioneers' process of nation building, which became the most appreciated heritage of Israel: "we are not the generation that dried up the swamps and 'made the wasteland flourish,' but we are the generation that restored the past to relevancy. This was one of the burdens we carried on our shoulders" (Levi 2013, p. 48).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, while in Morocco Jewish Moroccans suffered due to their connection to Zionism, in Israel they suffered great difficulties due to the unique culture they brought with them and the different national role and cultural heritage that was ascribed to them (Trevisan Semi 2012).

## Moroccan Jewish associations and heritage centers in Israel

Heritage centers are an exemplar of the mutual dependence between heritage and history (Edson 2004; Croke 2010), combining "history's universality with heritage's possessive intimacy" (Waterton and Watson 2010, p. 2). Most of the heritage centers in Israel take on the complementary roles of a traditional exhibit-based museum and a community institution. They curate the stories of local personalities and heroes, and the settings of events that frame regional history. Preserving the unique objects of daily life and presenting heritage narratives to visitors are some of the everyday practices taken on at these sites (Katriel 1997). It is important to note that Jews that immigrated from Arab and Muslim countries suffered from marginalization in the Israeli Zionist narrative. Even though the "ingathering of the exiles" and the "melting pot of sects" were the official approach in Israel, the Israeli heritage presented a uniform image and identity based mainly on an Eastern European denomination (Shenhav-Keller 2013). This approach stigmatized Jewish cultural denominations of the Middle East as primitive representations of Judaism that must be uprooted to prevent the "levantinization" of the new state (Kahanoff [1972] 2011).

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4 The settlement towns that were inhabited by the immigrants from Morocco have expanded and become model communities. Among them are Dimona, Yavneh, Kiryat Gat, Ofakim, Sderot, Beit Shean, and more.

Only in the late 1970s and early 1980s did Israel witness a sort of Mizrahi counter-acculturation that strived to gain more visibility for their historical narrative and heritage (Stevens, Flinn and Shepherd 2010). In this spirit different ethnic museums, heritage associations, and heritage centers of marginalized Jewish ethnic groups were opened to the public (Trevisan, Miccoli, and Parfitt 2013). Most of the communal museums displayed a sense of urgency for the preservation and commemoration of their community's history before and after immigrating to Israel. The associations and heritage centers also declared that they wish to utilize these cultural arenas in order to give the various communities a proper place in the pages of history (Nissimi 2014).

One of the first associations of this kind was *The Alliance of The Moroccan Exodus* that was founded on October 23, 1967, in a small town named Sderot in the Negev desert. Its main goal was to preserve the Moroccan Jewish heritage: "to conserve, to promote, and to promulgate cultural values and the historical legacy of Moroccan Jewry, and to highlight its contributions to Israeli society" (Asraf 2008, p. 12). The international *Institute for the Research of Moroccan Jewry* was established as part of it to conduct interdisciplinary research, and to develop an awareness of the community's two-thousand-year history. The establishment of *The Seat of Moroccan and Moroccan Jewish History*, named after Robert and Michelle Asraf, was another steppingstone in the preservation of the community's cultural heritage. At the same time some more initiatives arose to save the community's heritage from oblivion, by publishing hundreds of the books which Moroccan rabbis from previous centuries couldn't publish and renewing the publication of copies that had run out.

## Methods

To analyze this ethnic community's process of heritage building, I conducted an autoethnography research. As a form of research that involves observation of an individual's lived experiences with cultural, political, and social meanings (Levy 2020), I made an in-situ observation of my family's "roots trip" to the Mellah in Marrakesh (2016). I described the journey in detail in the diary I kept during it. I also held an in-depth interview with my father, David Vaknin Keinan, who was one of the founders of the Association and served as its chairman for 35 years, as well as informal conversations with five members of the Association. Additionally, I collected maps, documents, and photographs of the Association's main events from the people who had participated in them through the years.

In the process of interpreting, writing, and researching the cultural heritage (*ethnos*) and the self (*auto*) (Bochner 2000), I used evocative autoethnography that focuses on narrative presentations (Ellis 2004; 2008), by organizing the analysis in three maps which I created. The maps sketch the "paths" made by the immigrants

and their cultural heritage in three different locations in time and space. These locations visually and textually indicate the physical and mental route made by the heritage. The event that lies at the center of this research began with collecting friends and names of friends from among the immigrants from Marrakesh, and with planning the first conference, which took place in the fall of 1985 (the *Sukkot Festival*<sup>5</sup>). Following this initial gathering, the conferences became the central annual event for the community. The first conventions (up until the tenth one) were held in Park HaYarkon, Tel Aviv<sup>6</sup> and afterward the conventions migrated to different cities throughout the country: Yavneh, Ashkelon, Yokneam Illit, and in recent years Ashdod.<sup>7</sup>

I became acquainted with the Association as part of the routine lifestyle in my parents' home while I was still a child. Throughout my childhood I remember the many conversations my father held with people about the importance of the unity of the Jewish community of Marrakesh, and I remember being greatly occupied with all matters of life in the Association, including community and cultural meetings, meetings with journalists, and conferences. I remember especially the lively traffic in the house and the many goings-on in anticipation of the festival of Sukkot, when the yearly unity conventions were held.

## Analysis

### The Association's political initiatives

In an interview I held with my own father about the need for the Association, he explained that this idea of heritage preservation goes back to a Jewish agency in Marseille, France, which was active during the early 1980s:

During the time I was in Paris, I sat with one of my friends who established the Jews of Marrakesh in Paris branch. He is from Marrakesh [...] we played together on the Jewish soccer team in Marrakesh. We sat and talked, and I invited some friends. One of them was Ori Sabag, who was a member of the Knesset and a leader of the community in Be'er Sheva<sup>8</sup> at the time. We decided to establish an organization of Jews from Marrakesh in Israel. That was in the early 1980s [...] It

5 The *Sukkot Festival* is a Torah-commanded holiday celebrated for seven days.

6 Park HaYarkon is a large park in Tel Aviv, Israel, with about sixteen million visits annually.

7 All these cities were founded in the 1950s as development towns designed for settling immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries.

8 Be'er Sheva is the largest city in the Negev desert. A large portion of the population is made up of the descendants of Mizrahi Jews who immigrated from Arab and Muslim countries after 1948.

is amazing to think that today we are celebrating 40 years of the Alliance of the Jews of Marrakesh [...].

Afterward, I gathered a group of 15 friends, and we began establishing institutions. Managerial boards, secretariat, cultural committees, organizing committees, branch committees [...]. I was acquainted with Tel Aviv's city secretaries in the days of Cheech (the nickname of Shlomo Lahat, the mayor of Tel Aviv-Jaffa at the time). (The secretaries) Shmulik Levy and Ilan Moeal and I came together, and I presented the subject to them, and we got permission from them to hold the first convention in Park HaYarkon [...]. A few hundred people came to the first convention. There we started to keep an organized record of community members. In those days advertising the events was achieved through letters and searching out the community members' addresses. We divided the state amongst ourselves by towns: Be'er Sheva, Haifa, Yerucham, Netivot, Sderot, Ashkelon, Kiryat Gat, Netanya, Krayot, Hatzor HaGlilit, Kiryat Shemona, Tiberius. Wherever there were representatives, we gave them fliers in synagogues and through the post offices.

At the latest conference (number 37), which was held in Ashdod in 2019, my father briefly described in his opening words the idea and initiative for the establishment of the Association:

With the 37<sup>th</sup> year of the Marrakesh Immigrants' Association, I am honored to lay before you the story of its establishment and activities since 1982. Organization began with the actions of a handful of people. The goal was to maintain communication between us and to safeguard the legacy and the glorious rich traditions [...]. The hope was to bequeath this heritage to future generations of Marrakesh immigrants. A legacy of memories from the city's yeshivot and rabbis, from the synagogues, of songs and poems, of the Alliance School and its administrators and educators, from the youth groups, from the kindergartens and their songs, and in general, of the life of our community, inside the Mellah walls and outside. All this and more, is saved in our memories and in their light, we inaugurated the first convention on the Festival of Sukkot of 1985 in Park HaYarkon [...].

Many immigrants from Marrakesh that have participated in the events come from cities, developing towns, villages, and kibbutzim from all over the country. The meeting was extremely exciting. It turned into a celebration of the realization of the Zionist dream of the Jewish community of Marrakesh, which its thinkers and judges called 'little Jerusalem'. It was a special occasion not only of heritage celebration but also of the reunion of friends who had not seen each other in years; the reunion of administrators and teachers with their former students, of neighbors from the same buildings and streets. There were bursts and waves of indescribable happiness, rejoicing, embracing, and of course, the recounting of past experiences in Marrakesh and of experiences of immigration and absorption in Israel.

From that initial convention until today – the 37<sup>th</sup> annual conference – the Association has become a living and breathing body with activities all over the

country, thanks to the donations and actions of the volunteers heading it. We created and continue to provide community social activities, traditional events, national holidays, evenings of song and poetry, Sabbaths of study, heritage delegations to Morocco in general, and to Marrakesh in particular, and the crowning achievement of all these activities is our traditional annual conventions on every Festival of Sukkot, which have become the central event of Marrakesh Jewry in Israel and the diaspora. [...] Brothers and sisters, dear children of Marrakesh, I find it a sacred duty, with awe and admiration, to bless God that we merited this arrival. Yes, a wonderful duty to bless, in your names, and in my name, all our honored assistants and their continuing supportive assistance in the activities of the Association [...]. Likewise, the dedicated activists that selflessly volunteer and bring to fruition the Association as an exemplary and model social community body that safeguards its unique heritage, grounded in fraternity, and faithful friendship [...]. With sincere blessings, David Vaknin Kenan, Chairman of the Association (Vaknin Kenan 2019).

Shosh Roemee (2006), a descendant of Marrakesh and active participant since the founding of the organization, wrote about her memories from the gatherings on the Festival of Sukkot, beginning in 1986:

With excessive feverishness, I prepared together with my friends, also descendants of Marrakesh living in Dimona, for our first meeting with the Marrakesh Immigrants' Association, headed by David Vaknin, in Park Hayarkon in Tel Aviv.

In my mind's eye, I imagine the reunion with my childhood friends, neighbors, the butcher, the mohel,<sup>9</sup> circumciser, the shoemaker, the teachers, the principal, kindergarten teachers, and who didn't I imagine?

Our bus leaves Dimona at 9 am, in the direction of Tel Aviv. It crawls too slowly in the opinions of all my friends sitting next to me and behind me. I hold the position of representative of the Association and therefore, I am sitting in the first row, next to the driver. As the bus gathers distance from Dimona, his honor the rabbi, Mr. David Turgeman, sits down in the seat opposite me and calls out the Traveler's Prayer with great emotion. After the prayer, a tense silence prevailed on the bus.

None of us can imagine how many of our friends will come to the gathering, if any. There is a certain tenseness in the air. We are all wondering, smiling, breaking out in spontaneous laughter, falling quiet again. On all sides, jokes are heard, and after them, songs, and recitations from our distant childhood in Marrakesh.

As we get closer to our destination, shouts of joy break out from all around [...]. The driver takes ages to look for a parking space. Our necks are tense with pain. Our eyes searching to recognize. Shouts of joy [...] everyone recognizes this one and that one [...] everyone pushing to get through the doors of the bus that are refusing to part and to let us rush outside and hug our dear ones. Everyone

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9 *Mohel* is a Jew trained in the practice of brit milah, the "covenant of circumcision".

around us is laughing, crying, excited, sighing. From the distant stage, childhood songs are blaring. Everyone is experiencing happiness mixed with sadness. Everyone who arrived with baskets packed with food and sweets barely managed to open their bags all day. Every sandwich was stopped on its way to the open mouth, never making it in. Everyone who had once planned to immigrate together to Israel and to continue to build their futures together, found themselves face to face, mouths open wide, cheeks washed with tears.

The first conference brought after it many others, for the next 40 years at least. As the years passed, the number of members grew. Our children and grandchildren joined and were looking forward to them, enjoying seeing their parents dancing around out of joy and happiness.

### Returning “home” to the Mellah

The main annual event of the Association was the yearly conference. These conferences, especially the conference held in 1995 in honor of the Association's tenth anniversary, were experienced by the participants as a return to their childhood, neighborhood, language, and heritage. It was a return to the “family home”. The idea was to gather and use the conference as a small journey in time and space to return to the neighborhood, streets, and houses in the Mellah where the community once lived. The event was named the *Journey to Our Past in Marrakesh*. Members of the Association and their families convened together and relived the experience of the Mellah.

This necessitated some research in reconstructing the map of the Mellah and the original street names. After the map of the Jewish Mellah was reproduced, a small model of the Mellah's streets was built. The model was implemented amongst the palm trees in HaYarkon park. The main gate of the park represented the main gate through which the inhabitants of the Mellah in Marrakesh entered the neighborhood. The participants were requested to find their old homes, where they reunited with their neighbors and friends.

My father described this event as a tunnel to his heritage:

The main feature we had for the decade celebrations was to reconstruct the Mellah and its streets in HaYarkon park. A film was produced to document the event. Since Marrakesh was known as the city of dates and palm trees, and HaYarkon park is full of palm trees (that don't bear fruit), we decided that every row of these trees would be named after a street, while the gate at the entrance to the park would symbolize the gate of the Mellah. This way, everyone that came (to the event) entered their own street and every row was labeled with a hanging sign with the name of the street in the Mellah. And then [...] the embracing, the kisses, the excitement. For an instant we were once again those same children that met their neighbors, their teachers, and their old friends. Because since the immigration to Israel, most of the connections were severed.

Shosh Roemie (2006) wrote about her journey to the past as a way to bring heritage back to present life:

In the park there are planted palm trees like those we left in Marrakesh. We reimagined those small stores and asked their owners to take their places as if they had never left them. With eyes shining with happiness, the sphinge<sup>10</sup> seller fried golden doughnuts, their scent wafting, and found himself surrounded by the men and women that went back in time and were transformed for a moment back into playful youths. They laughed out loud, baring teeth that were once white.

The goal of the event was to bring to life the streets and the daily communal life:

The cloth seller was asked to bring with him colorful fabrics decorated with flowers and polka dots [...] the legumes seller recited the names of the spices and their healing properties. This soothes belly aches, and this soothes tooth aches. This is the Suak plant, which whitens teeth, and to our astonishment, from a clay vessel, was drawn a black paste that was used as vegan shampoo. The water seller (el grab in Arabic) moved among his friends, pouring filtered water into copper cups. Dressed in a colorful red robe decorated with colorful bells, atop his head sat a cone shaped fez, and at its tip a colorful cotton ball, which he spun with surprising deftness, for the adoring eyes of the crowd. Another water seller passed out tea with peppermint (Roemie 2006).

After the abovementioned conference, a film documenting the event was produced, as well as a pamphlet which endeavored to describe, restore, and invigorate memories of life in the Mellah of Marrakesh:

This modest pamphlet is presented on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Marrakesh Immigrants' Association, a revelatory expression of the experience of Jewish life in the Mellah of Marrakesh. We are beholden to perpetuate the distinctiveness of the immigrants from Marrakesh in Israel and in the diaspora, as well as to maintain contact between members despite their dispersal throughout Israel and despite leaving many years ago [...]. The urge to maintain contact arises from the people's desire to preserve the rich legacy of their community and their hope of passing it on to future generations.

These words testify to the urge to actively preserve the community's heritage, and to the great need to create new connections to that past heritage. The verse "know where you came from and where you are going" (Mishna Avot 3:1), which blends past

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10 *Sphinge* is a morrocan word for a doughnut that originated from Muslim Spain and was popular in the Maghreb.

and present into an inseparable notion of heritage, captures the participants' main motivation in this activity.

The research journey tracking the Association's actions to preserve the Mellah Jewish heritage and to rebuild the community upon its cultural heritage in Israel was visualized through a geographical and chronological reproduction of the journey made by the immigrants in their main event. To illustrate the three different points in time and space of the 15 families that participated in the event, three different maps were created. The maps describe Jewish life in the Mellah in Marrakesh, the families' distribution throughout Israel after immigrating to Israel, and their relocation at the 10<sup>th</sup> conference in Park HaYarkon. These three points in time and space illustrate the physical and conceptual distance of community members from the city of their birth and their ethnic heritage.

### Returning back to Israel

The first map visualizes the Mellah in 1945, including notable central places: businesses, synagogues, public buildings, and streets named as they were in those days. (Fig. 3) It also indicates the names of 15 families, members of the community of the Marrakesh immigrants' Association, and their addresses before their immigration to Israel.

The map marks the locations in which the Marrakesh immigrants' settled and resettled in Israel during the 1950s. (Fig. 4) The geographical distribution and the distances and gaps that were created between the Mellah inhabitants illustrate the way the community was scattered after arriving in Israel, leaving behind them the narrow intimate streets of the gated Mellah and the lives they used to share.





	Family surname	Address in the Mellah	The settlement in Israel
1	Va'aknin/Kenan	El Harar	Ashkelon
2	Bar Kochba	A'suk	Aminadav
3	Moyal	A-Sakaya	Bnei Brak
4	Ruami	Lesna	Dimona
5	Ben David	Sekuella	Netanya
6	Asayag	Brima	Krayot
7	Rozolyo	El Calli	Bat Yam
8	Cohen	Ben Simhon	Kiryat Gat
9	Abudarham	Rabi Yaakov Avitan	Petah Tikva
10	Zadya	El Gazarin	Beit She'an
11	Sultan	Imam El Ghazali	Jerusalem
12	Ben David	A-Sabbah	Yavne
13	Abargil	A'afir	Kiryat Tiv'on
14	Beeri	El-Hari	Dimona
15	Algrabilali	Ta'ajar Yeshua	Kiryat Yam

The table, like the maps, shows how close were the inhabitants of the tiny Mellah, and how distant they became after arriving in Israel. The physical distance transformed into a mental distance and disconnection that started to erode the community's collective memory and heritage. The events organized by the Association were the only platform available for the community members to meet, reconvene, and activate their cultural heritage.

## Epilogue: from the Mellah to Israel and back

In recent years research has been brimming with studies about community ties and heritage. This plentitude of writings testifies to the importance of the sense of community in societal life in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As a social unit, the community is a framework in which members can participate and influence economic, political, social, and emotional interests. According to Bauman (2001), this concept expresses people's yearning to acquire security in an insecure world, while Sedan (1990) claim that people are hungry for material resources as well as fulfilling and rewarding relationships. The sense of belonging is achieved through friendships, integration, influence, and the fulfillment of needs and spiritual connectivity, which has transcendence beyond the daily life of community members. Thus, community is described

as a process of identifying shared needs or goals that develop a sense of unity and confidence (*ibid.*).

Sedan (1990) refers to the concept of “level of community” as relevant to the level of interest and participation of people in the community’s educational and social activities. The assumption is that a population with a high level of community will be willing to participate in activities and contribute at a higher level than populations with a lower level of community. Based on this work, we can describe the level of community of populations in a particular geographical location by how close and lasting the relationships are between the inhabitants living in the area, how they empathize with each other and feel that they have ideological and ethical mutuality. These people would be defined as having a high level of community: people with positive interpersonal relationships with each other, sharing mutual ideological and social aspirations, engaging in activities that express a mutual dependence on social programs and a common public.

The establishment of the Association was aimed to achieve a symbolic “high level of community”, despite the widening geographical and emotional distance that existed between the members after settling down in Israel. The sense of closeness that was achieved in the new home (Israel) resembled the closeness that existed in the former home (the Mellah). Restoring the intimacy of the Mellah of Marrakesh by replicating and relocating the past space and time in the current space and time, allowed not only the re-engagement of the members but also the rehabilitation of their heritage. Furthermore, by removing the community’s heritage from the geographical margins of Israel (the development towns) to the center of Israel (Park Ha-Yarkon, Tel Aviv), the heritage also relocated itself inside the Israeli space and time. In this way the past connections were created anew in the community itself and in the Israeli society. Even though this shift happened only for a few hours, its symbolic meaning was echoed in the documentary film, the brochures, and the following conferences. Thus, the social-geographical-symbolic gathering can be understood as a continuation of the struggle to preserve the heritage while at the same time become and be Israelis. Building a model of the Mellah at the tenth convention and finding “anew” the old homes helped not only in the process of re-sharing the heritage, but also in adjusting the past heritage to the current Israeli cultural heritage.

Bilu and Ben-Ari (1992) describe the ways in which people of Moroccan descent relocated their community’s cultural tradition into the Israeli space (for example the tradition of pilgrimage to holy graves) in order to “sanctify” the Israeli space and make it part of their Moroccan-Jewish heritage. The move made by the Association demonstrates the reverse process, in which the Moroccan-Jewish tradition is displaced into the Israeli space in order to settle in this space along with it.

As someone who has been engaged in Waldorf education for 20 years and who dedicates many resources to the creation of school and classroom community and is aware of the deep and innate human value of and need for it (Steiner 1923), I was

excited to rediscover the commendable 40-year actions of my father in creating and cultivating, from amidst dispersal, a community for the Jews of Marrakesh. (fig. 7) I am made aware, as living proof, of how heritage is passed down within a family; and the recognition of the great importance and value of unity and human closeness lives on in my father and in the inheritance for generations to come, as well as in me.

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