

How a Moroccan NGO Provides Services Based on an Ancient Religious Connection

By Noah Schrott-Schubert



At the Akrich interfaith tree nursery in 2015 during its distribution of trees with the area's farming families, from left to right are President of the Jewish Community of Marrakech-Safi Jacky Kadoch, High Atlas Foundation President and author Yossef Ben-Meir, United States Ambassador Dwight Bush, and Governor of Al Haouz Province Younes El Bathaoui (photo by HAF).

On the 7th of January, Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir, president of the Moroccan NGO, High Atlas Foundation, published an [essay](#) in Johns Hopkins University's *The SAIS Review*, which sheds light on how people's needs in Morocco can be addressed through participatory interfaith dialogue.

The story described in this article is a truly Moroccan story. There are few places in the world where the past nurtures the present as much as in Morocco. Isn't it a fascinating symbol of [interfaith](#), when places of culture and spirit are turned into places of nature and modernity? Isn't this what sustainability is in a way about, one group nurturing the other, a mutualistic relationship between a group in the present and a group in the past?

Nowadays, Moroccan farmers may not know who the people buried in the ancient Jewish cemeteries all around their country actually were. And neither necessarily would the new generation of Jewish people who left the country know that their grandparents used to live alongside Moroccan Muslims and now are buried in this country. But using the land of the Jewish communities nearby these places for endemic fruit tree nurseries will in one way or the other guide everybody to understanding what your past looked like.

The Moroccan people take care of cemeteries fully knowing their heritage. And realisation strengthens the ties between two groups, who do not live side by side in Morocco anymore. The Ministry of Culture in Morocco goes even further and claims that this is what empowerment looks like. And somehow it does.

First, knowing what your past looks like, will let the roots you have in the earth of your place of origin grow deeper and will finally tie you to the place you live. This makes the incentive of improving this place inevitable. Thereby comes development. Also, it is empowering in a sense of economic well being that you are lent land without cost and thus trusted to care for it.

Having a tree nursery closeby a Jewish cemetery implies trust from the community. With this trust comes new fruit yield. What is beautiful is the High Atlas Foundation's role in the process of interfaith. They are not the creators, but the catalysts. HAF does not preserve a connection, but rather it builds the renewed basis.

In no case is HAF the party that decides what is done, but rather the party that carries out what is wished to be done. As Yossef Ben-Meir writes in his article: "The development process begins with local communities determining their development goals from an empowered disposition to help ensure that their decisions reflect their priority interests." This clearly shows HAF's role. HAF facilitates what is locally determined.

There is a Jewish-Muslim connection in Morocco, which can be found nowhere else in the world in the same way. This connection is there and the question over the past has been whether and how to apply it to meet people's needs. HAF as a convener between two groups has applied this connection for sustainable development.

HAF did not tie the bonds between Jewish and Muslim people; HAF only provided the resources. On behalf of the farming families, HAF approached the Moroccan Jewish community to request in-kind leases for building tree nurseries on this land. HAF facilitated the process wished by the communities.

What must be mentioned too is HAF's partnership with the Moroccan government. The title "[House of Life](#)" was given in 2015 by the Governor of Al Haouz, Younes El Bathaoui, beautifully sums up what the High Atlas Foundation and the Jewish and Muslim communities have created together: places of life where every aspect of living comes together. Dialogue, work, and faith, just to name a few, are all present hand-in-hand here.

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