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Research Article

Agricultural Development as an Interfaith Bridge in Morocco

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INTRODUCTION

For more than 2,000 years, the land that is Morocco was home to the largest number of Jewish people in the Arab world. Because of this history, there are renowned cultural and historic sites in Morocco that are connected to Judaism. To cherish and protect Morocco's history, its Jewish history must also be cherished and protected.

In this article

2020). After Israel was founded in 1948, thousands left for the newly founded state. By the end of this first exodus, some 60,000 Moroccan Jewish people had migrated to Israel (Maldonado 2016).

Following Moroccan independence from France in 1956, the question of national identity arose: what did it mean to be Moroccan? Post-independence Pan-Arabism supported the unification of all Arab countries and thus did not place Jewish Moroccans in the same category as Arabs (Maldonado). This movement, operating in tandem with growing Zionism, created an atmosphere where many Jewish Moroccans felt a stronger sense of belonging in Israel. By 1968, only 20% of Morocco's Jewish population remained. Today, there are fewer than 3,000.

We seek to demonstrate here that preservation of Moroccan Jewish cultural artifacts and Morocco's interfaith/intercultural history is beneficial to the country's development and toward ensuring solidarity between Jewish and Muslim people in the Maghreb. The High Atlas Foundation¹ is achieving this preservation with an agricultural/intercultural/interfaith project.

JEWISH HISTORY IN MOROCCO

As the Jewish Virtual Library (2021) indicates about Morocco, Jewish and Arab history has long been tightly connected in Morocco, evidenced by Hebrew inscriptions on tombstones in the Roman ruins at Volubilis. Several Moroccan Amazigh tribes were converted to Judaism, and Jewish people fled to Morocco after the first wave of persecution and expulsion from Spain; this occurred before the Muslim conquest of the Maghreb. During the period that followed, the Jewish population in Morocco dispersed into the cities, where they enriched the economy.

In the new millennium, important centers of Jewish learning emerged in Ceuta, Fes, the Atlas region, and Sijilmassa, near Tafilalet. For this reason, the great Jewish

This is not to say that the Jewish people of Morocco were always welcomed nor that they did not experience discrimination. Periods of intolerance and incidents of violence toward them are woven into the nation's history. Religious doctrine turned against non-Muslims for a while. At some point in history, Jewish people were prohibited from living in Marrakech; later, they were subjected to forced conversions, even massacred. In response, many migrated back to Spain, returning to Morocco only under more favorable conditions from more tolerant sovereigns. Eventually, those living in the cities of Fes and Meknes were kept in segregated quarters, or *mellahs*. Tens of thousands took refuge in Morocco during the second Spanish Inquisition, and although they were not entirely well received, the population grew and thrived over the next several hundred years, strengthening their position through a variety of professions.

Today, the remaining synagogues and cemeteries unfold the story of a rich culture and strong faith. Historical records show the vital role Jewish merchants held in the maritime trade at the ports of Mogador (Essaouira) and in other cities along the Atlantic coast. The preserved tombs of Jewish saints—or *tsaddiks*—testify to their place in Moroccan history and culture and also speak to the fact that Morocco is a global center of Jewish mysticism, tradition, and knowledge.

MOROCCO AS A MODEL OF COEXISTENCE

Despite historic tensions between Muslim and Jewish people, Morocco is a model of coexistence in the Arab world between the two religious groups. King Hassan II introduced legislation to protect the country's Jewish population, establishing a continuing legacy of multicultural unity. In the 2011 Constitution, Jewish Moroccans were made more than just citizens—they are named as an integral part of Moroccan heritage.

nationality is never lost. Mohammed V made you Citizens. In my Constitution, I make you full Moroccans” (Boum 2013, 119). In 2011, the Constitutional revisions emphasized the connection between Jewish history and Moroccan heritage, describing the ethno-cultural interconnection.

The Moroccan government embraces multiculturalism as an important aspect of development, including the support of interfaith dialogue and an inclusive approach. In 2008, King Mohammed VI named culture as a “driving force for development and a bridge for facilitating dialogue” (Mohammed VI 2008).

In 2012, a national project to restore Jewish cemeteries and the surrounding land was launched. Of the 600 Jewish burial sites in Morocco, 167 have been preserved to some extent. The High Atlas Foundation’s unique strategy to help achieve long-term preservation of these locations is to enable the use of the adjacent, empty lands in order for the local farming communities to build their organic fruit tree nurseries, which they critically need as they transition away from planting traditional crops of barley and corn. The Moroccan Jewish community is strongly supportive of the free lending of these lands for this purpose and the Moroccan government through its National Initiative for Human Development has already funded what has now become a highly productive community nursery in the Ouarzazate province nearby the thousand-year-old burial site of the Jewish saint Rabbi David-Ou-Mouche.

Nationally, the Moroccan Jewish community is one of numerous bodies contributing to the nation’s tree-planting efforts for human development. Organizations that include the High Commission for Water and Forests and the Fight Against Desertification, the Ministry of Education, the High Atlas Foundation (HAF), universities, and cooperatives have further contributed to the in-kind lending of land for building of tree nurseries. In December 2021, King Mohammed VI ordered the restoration of hundreds more Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and other historic sites (Klaiman 2021).

allegiance rather than competition so that communities can develop in a way that benefits everyone (Al-Akkad 2018).

Already, some seventy thousand Israelis visit Morocco yearly, but the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco that resumed in December 2020 is serving to vastly increase that pre-pandemic level of socio-economic benefit and good will. Undoubtedly, many Jewish Moroccans will return from Israel to visit their home and the land of their ancestors, particularly with the opening of liaison offices and availability of direct flights (Kasraoui 2020).

For the first time in any Arab country, Moroccan Jewish history and culture has been incorporated into the primary school curriculum. In addition, Jewish and Muslim students at Musa Ibn Maimon High School in Casablanca celebrate holidays from both religions and learn both Hebrew and Arabic, as the Jewish Virtual Library indicates on its website. These events reflect the integration of the faiths and cultures and the significance of their shared history.

There are lesson plans currently being developed highlighting the range of areas of Moroccan Jewish life that intersect with Moroccan heritage, done in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in order for it to be a standard part of the public education curriculum.

WHY PRESERVE JEWISH HISTORIC CEMETERIES?

There is an 800-year-old cemetery in Tighedouine in the Al Haouz province. It holds the history of a small community that was the central Jewish population in that area at the time. When a European company wanted to purchase and develop the land, a local Amazigh woman protested and saved it from destruction (Elmaleh 2009, 0:29). What remains reminds us not only of that former population but also of the coexistence of Jewish and Amazigh people who enjoyed the fruits of the surrounding farms and olive trees.

initial survey of their status at the project's inception showed that while they were in poor condition, there were Muslim neighbors who continued to care for them sometimes even 70 years after Jewish people had left the surrounding community (Gold 2020). These custodians take great pride in their stewardship as a moral act in line with their own religious beliefs to not only guard the graves of Moroccan citizens but also of revered saints. This becomes then not only an act of moral obligation but a means of distributing redevelopment money and of serving as a conduit for tourism spending as those from the diaspora return to visit the sites.

As noted in the foreword to Asher Knafo's *The Song of the Stones*, such sites are places of life where both Jewish and Muslim communities come together and "share a common grave." Further, the Jewish cemeteries of Essaouira become "places of reading, under open skies" where visitors can "come face to face with the history of both the living and the dead" (Knafo). The epitaphs that he translated reveal universal messages of love and loss from husbands to wives and children to parents, opening a window into the history of the Moroccan Jewish community. Rabbinic tradition rooted in the oral interpretations of the teachings of the Torah explains that the burying of the dead is the highest among all human callings and practices. After all, there can be no higher reward or expression of gratitude but simply a showing of respect and recognition of our shared and certain end. That reward is long life for ourselves and society.

In Morocco, so many hundreds of cemetery locations also means an equivalent number of collected lands that are vitally needed for farming communities to plant nurseries as an integral part of overcoming systemic poverty. Therefore, the cultural preservation of these locations could also mean their furthering of agricultural development with communities in their regions if nurseries were built upon them. The preservation of cemeteries aided by the utilization of the neighboring lands for sustainable agriculture enables them to reemerge as locations of public gathering, storytelling, and education. Indeed, in Morocco, the potential quantity of organic fruit trees that can be generated on these lands that are literally across the nation

TREES SUPPORT MULTICULTURALISM AND PRESERVATION OF HISTORY

Younger generations are no longer as interested in the tapestry of the past, and time erodes the monuments and artifacts that were once vital parts of their deep cultural heritage. As population grows and cities expand, historical sites run the risk of being lost forever. The first Muslim cemetery in Essaouira, for instance, is now a paved car park with no sign, no indication of what was once there. In addition, only 20 percent of the epitaphs on the tombstones of the Jewish cemeteries of Essaouira were able to be deciphered, despite the hard work of Asher Knafo.

In recognition of this passage of time, developmental initiatives designed to improve rural livelihoods work with Jewish heritage sites, using the area near burial grounds to build tree nurseries, and return the money back into the community, in an effort to preserve the past's symbols while furthering human development initiatives.

A coalition between the Moroccan Jewish community and HAF works with the land surrounding historic Jewish burial grounds, planting fruit and nut trees and medicinal plant seeds in nurseries until the saplings are mature enough to be transported to other locations. These saplings are provided to local farming families or educational centers for transplanting through partnerships with USAID Farmer to Farmer and Ecosia.

Fruit tree farming represents one solution farming families believe could end the cycle of rural poverty, which persists due to the harvest's uncertainty and the oversaturation of barley and corn (Moroccan farming staples) in the agricultural market. But with more diversified crops, the concentration of staples decreases, and the chance for greater financial return among fruit producers becomes possible.

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This includes almond, Argan, avocado, carob, cherry, date, fig, jujuba, lemon, olive, pomegranate, prickly pear, quince, and walnut plants. In addition, the processing of products as oils and extracts further diversifies markets, reduces overall competition, and improves livelihoods. Planting nurseries beside the Jewish cemeteries in Morocco opens a pathway to greater levels of food, income, employment, justice, security, biodiversity, multiculturalism, capacities, and dream-building.

This stipulates that the resting place of Morocco's Jewish ancestors is also the birthplace of fruits and nuts, products that sustain the life of the community; in a way, these ancient ancestors are still supporting their local society.

AKRICH: THE FIRST SITE

When HAF met with members of the local organizations as part of a development approach prioritizing local voices and local needs, an important initiative was building tree nurseries. The first nursery began in Akrich, in the Al Haouz province, just an hour south of Marrakesh. The village is home to the 700-year-old tomb of Rabbi Raphael HaCohen, a revered saint who came to the nearby village of Achbarou to teach and heal.

The story goes that, hundreds of years ago, a Jewish man was traveling in the area on a mule. From a distance, he saw that a fire was burning near the site of the Rabbi's tomb. Frightened, he told the villagers, who traveled to the cemetery and found the fire. Once on the site, they realized someone important was buried there, and so they had discovered the tomb of Rabbi HaCohen.

Many pilgrims during the 1960s and 1970s visited the cemetery; however, only a few visit it nowadays. The site currently accommodates a well and a guesthouse for visitors. Additionally, a synagogue, dining hall, and shrine for the Rabbi surround the tombs of local Jewish people.

night the Rabbi visited him in a dream, warning him that someone was prepared to steal his land and take his life. The Rabbi's warning saved the man, and as an act of gratitude, the *pasha* donated his land to the local Jewish people. This land includes the area of the cemetery as well as what is now the nursery.

Just past the cemetery, there is said to be a collection of ruins of the old Jewish *mellah*, which may have been part of a commune called Oumminas. Although Jewish people do not live in Akrich now, one can feel a strong connection to the Jewish community from the presence of the old burial site.

This land, belonging to the Jewish community and housing the nursery, is cared for by Abderrahim Beddah, a Muslim man whose family for three generations has guarded the cemetery. For his family, they understood that there was a valuable connection between the cemetery and the community and that it needed to be preserved (Pantelick 2020).

During the peak of the cemetery's existence as a place of pilgrimage, tents were sometimes set up behind it to accommodate the number of visitors. As Beddah pointed out: "Everyone from the nearby community would come to bring food to the visitors." The area has always been a place of multicultural acceptance.

The nursery in Akrich began in 2012. Quality fruit saplings were hard to access before this HAF community nursery supplied them for the area. If farmers wanted to diversify their crops, they had to travel far away to get fruit, nuts, or medicinal plants, and they were typically expensive.

In the past eight years, the Akrich nursery has produced over 180,000 almond, Argan, carob, fig, lemon, and pomegranate trees planted by over 1,000 farming families and 130 public schools. Every year, more seeds are planted as capacity expands. In just three years (2015–2018) HAF nurseries produced 150,000 almond, fig, pomegranate, Argan, carob, and lemon trees.

At the time, seven parcels of land were available for expanding the nursery, and HAF was finalizing plans to bring the nursery project to a nationwide scale. In 2021, U.S. Consul General Lawrence Randolph also visited the nursery along with members of the Muslim and Jewish communities for interfaith activities as part of USAID's Religious and Ethnic Minorities Activities (REMA aka Dakira) including a symbolic candle lighting and shared meal (Stoiber 2021). At that event, the local people shared their individual stories in what became apparent as their understanding of their shared common identity.

SCALING UP

The Akrich nursery was the first of a pilot project: the House of Life Initiative. House of Life, or *bet hayyim*, refers to the eternal resting place or cemetery. According to Jewish tradition, a cemetery can be more sacred than a synagogue, and so the care of the cemeteries is a very important social and religious responsibility.

The nurseries encourage preservation of historic Jewish sites near where they are built. They employ local people, who are therefore eligible to receive health care and social security coverage. Both of these are otherwise difficult to access, especially in informal work, which represents nearly 60 percent of waged workers in Morocco (Abdel Samad 2016, 28). The nurseries have been the setting of interfaith dialogue and community actions within society.

The project is driven by support for multicultural development at the national level. The idea is that the project would have a three-fold effect: it would (1) encourage dialogue and partnership between the Jewish community and the Muslim community and the sharing of their collective knowledge and cultural memories that (2) help to alleviate rural poverty in the area and improve local livelihoods. And (3), planting trees in the area reduces desertification, which has made the land difficult and, in some places, unsuitable for farming.

Morocco, the government funded a second community tree nursery. This nursery site is located in Ouarzazate; it is near Rabbi David Ou-Mouche's tomb, its white façades and lush plants set against the surrounding land's earthy tones (Pantelik). There, 90,000 seeds have been grown, producing saplings that have been planted with thousands of local farming families and public schools.

Amid the "dusty foothills of the Moroccan Atlas Mountains," student-intern Nicolas Pantelick describes his first encounter with the simple beauty of the shared site: "Just after midday, I reached the millennia-old mausoleum of the venerated Hebrew saint Rabbi Ou-Moché, one-hour northwest of Ouarzazate, the Gateway to the Sahara." In harsh sunlight, he beheld "the alluring white silhouettes of buildings standing starkly against their earthen décor."

Once the pilots were producing successful results, the project began to expand nationally. The project could be expanded to more potential sites since there are 600 additional areas of land where Jewish burial sites are located. This would enable the Moroccan Jewish community to play a major role toward the nation achieving its goal of using interculturalism as a vehicle for national development. Indeed, the Moroccan Jewish community can assist farming communities of the nation in generating and planting the billions of fruit and forestry trees they need.

But shifting from pilot projects to a wide-scale level had to address several community concerns. For example, some families worried about the risk involved in agroforestry, such as losing land if the crops could not produce a sufficient return. The solution was to use donated land for growing saplings to a viable degree. Much of this land is used for nurseries, donated from the Jewish community and from the High Commission of Water and Forests and the Fight against Desertification.

As of 2022, this ongoing project plants more than 2 million seeds per season, in HAF's community nurseries. On January 17, 2022, the organization's annual National Planting Day event, coinciding with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday and the Jewish festival *Tu Bishvat* (the New Year of the Trees), continued to promote environmental

cemeteries throughout the country presents a major opportunity to build the people's tree nurseries alongside this cultural preservation effort. The nurseries inspire dedication to local participation in the long-term sustainability of the cultural efforts, while the interfaith initiatives are ushering this vast human development and environmental enhancement opportunity in the form of tree nurseries. Their integration and mutual reinforcement are now, through the successful pilot initiatives, a particularly Moroccan experience that is certainly relevant and replicable in nations of the world that seek agricultural development as a key measure for eradicating poverty along with dedication to the fulfillment of possibilities enabled by multicultural community and national identities.

CONCLUSION

Morocco is at a crossroads in regard to existing opportunities for interfaith initiatives as the number of Jewish Moroccans still living in the nation has dwindled to fewer than 3,000. Those who can still recall the time of mutual understanding and cohabitation must participate in development initiatives now before it is too late. Today's youth have rarely had the opportunity to sincerely consider this indelible part of the nation's past and character, and how that past could inform its present and its future. The nonprofit associations involved are dedicated to promoting and preserving Moroccan Jewish heritage, to strengthening society's plural identity, and to furthering sustainable development in Morocco. Cultural and site preservation, multicultural dialogue, and knowledge-building by these associations is harnessing the exceptional history of the Moroccan people and using it for human development initiatives.

Organic fruit tree nurseries benefiting Moroccan farming families, built on land lent in-kind by the Moroccan Jewish community, next to Jewish cemeteries and saints' tombs, symbolize a powerful and essential national initiative. Since Morocco shares all of the biozones represented in the MENA region, these initiatives have

Note

Additional information

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Notes

1 Author Y. Ben-Meir currently serves as President of the High Atlas Foundation, referenced in this article.

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