

Ramadan Reflections on Jewish-Muslim Relations

Holidays are a time for reflection and rejuvenation. They may separate us temporarily from those who do not share our customs, but can also offer opportunities to connect with them and celebrate our diversity and our commonalities. Ramadan is an excellent time to reflect on Jewish-Muslim relations, past, present, and future.

***The relationship between Judaism and Islam began in the seventh century, with the advent and spread of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Judaism and Islam share a great deal in terms of their basic religious outlook, jurisprudence, and practice. Both calendars are lunar, though the Jewish calendar is adjusted every few years to the solar one.

Many [Islamic beliefs and traditions follow from Judaism](#). In fact, the Arabic word Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and Hebrew word Hag (referring to pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem in Biblical times, and later meaning festival or holiday in general) come from the same root, which means circling (from the action of circling the altars in the Temple and the Kaaba). Moroccan Muslims and Jews also share a great deal culturally.

Jews first arrived in the Maghreb around 2500 years ago. Since Islam's arrival to Morocco, the lives of Jews and Muslims there (Amazigh and Arab) have been intertwined to varying degrees, depending on the place and the specific social and political circumstances at the time. After Israel's establishment in 1948, and even more so following Morocco's independence in 1956, the majority of Moroccan Jews emigrated to Israel, France, and Canada. Today, fewer than 3000 Jews remain in Morocco; Israel constitutes the second largest Moroccan diaspora (after France).

Read also: [Morocco's Legacy of Jewish-Muslim Coexistence](#)

The relative absence of Jews from Moroccan society since independence has left a large social and cultural void. Older Muslim Moroccans may

fondly remember their former Jewish neighbors, as shown in Aomar Baoum's [writings](#) or Kamal Hachkar's [films](#), but most Muslim Moroccans do not have personal experiences involving Jews. They often hear about the turbulent relations between Muslims and Jews, and are less familiar with the rich and more positive examples of coexistence. Organizations like [Mimouna Association](#) and [Bayt Dakira](#), for example, challenge those notions by highlighting precedents of – and offering opportunities for – multiculturalism and coexistence.

Throughout their joint history, [reciprocal relations between Jewish and Muslim communities](#) often existed in life's everyday routines and on special occasions. Certain dietary practices distinguished Muslims from Jews. Whereas kosher food is permissible to Muslims, Halal restrictions are not sufficient for Jews, who do not mix milk products and meat, and who have more stringent rules overall. Women who care and cook for their families are most often at the heart of dialogue between communities, including during the turbulent decades of the colonial period in the Maghreb. Jewish and Muslim women often came together for the preparation of certain foods, sometimes in the interior courtyards of multifamily houses.

Some dishes varied in the ways in which they were prepared based on the difference in dietary restrictions. The Maghrebi diet, shared by Muslims and Jews, included a wide variety of vegetables, legumes, grains, fruits, and spices and aromatic herbs. Both communities used many of the same cooking fats, though Jews did not usually use butter (so as not to mix dairy and meat). Pastries and deserts were shared by both, and Couscous was the traditional Friday meal. In the colonial society of the first half of the twentieth century, especially in small towns, Jewish-Muslim relations centered on food were generally more extensive than relations with their Christian neighbors.

Read also: [In Photos: Remembering Moroccan Jewry at the Fez Jewish Cemetery](#)

In some places, especially in the 20th century, shopping patterns also

distinguished the Jewish from the Muslim women; the former could more often be found at the market, and the latter women tended to be confined to the domestic space. Muslims frequently shopped in the Jewish quarters and purchased meat from kosher butchers.

The folk-veneration of saints played a major role in the lives of Moroccan and other North African Jews, particularly starting in the nineteenth-century, similar to the indigenous saint worship, which is a significant feature of North African Islam. [Religious rituals such as pilgrimages to the tombs of saints \(Hillulot\)](#) served as another space for interaction.

Hundreds of Jewish saints' tombs are scattered throughout North Africa, and to this day many Jews return to visit them.

Muslims venerate many of the Jewish saints, visit their burial places, and invoke their help. In the past, such sacred spaces became places of commercial exchange, blurring lines between the sacred and the profane, as well as between Jews and Muslims. In Tunisia, for example, a big annual Hillula takes place at [Al-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba](#) on Lag Ba'Omer, 33 days after Passover (which this year fell on April 29th). In Morocco, projects like High Atlas Foundation's [House of Life](#) ensure that Jewish cemeteries and tombs of revered rabbis and saints remain spaces of [meaningful interfaith/intercommunal cooperation](#).

Two holidays in particular – **Pessah (Passover)** and **Ramadan** - impose the greatest and longest dietary restrictions on Jews and Muslims, respectively. These holidays also provide opportunities for cooperation and positive interactions between the communities. In the weeks preceding Passover, Jews traditionally clean their homes thoroughly, clearing them of any trace of fermented foods (Hametz), which are prohibited for the eight days of Passover. This includes all grains (primarily wheat and rice), semolina, flour, fresh pastries and baked goods, and dried beans dating to before the beginning of Passover. This tradition, practiced even today, often took the form of the symbolic and “temporary” gift of these foods by Jewish families to their Muslim neighbors.

Read also: [Moroccan Jews and Muslims: A Model of Tolerance](#)

[for the World](#)

On the last day of Passover week, North African Jews mark the end of these dietary prohibitions with a ceremony called “Mimouna” which includes a festive meal for family members, neighbors, and friends, composed of various dishes whose ingredients are forbidden during Passover week: pastries, leavened bread, and, obviously, couscous, which on this occasion was served sweet, with sugar, honey, raisins, and candy.

Muslim neighbors and friends were also invited to the Jewish celebration; if they had kept the forbidden foods for their Jewish neighbors, they returned them after the feast, usually in the form of pastries and sweets. In the Maghreb, Mimouna constituted the interfaith and intercommunity event par excellence, marking the re-establishment of ties between Jews and Muslims after a week of separation. In recent years, this tradition has been revived in Morocco and beyond. This year, for the first time, the embassies of Morocco and Israel in DC [held a joint online Mimouna celebration](#). Other Mimouna online events were organized and attended by Moroccans, Israelis, and others.

During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from sunrise until sunset, and break the fast with the Iftar meal. In the past, Jewish women would sometimes cook for their Muslim neighbors so that the Muslim women could rest after having been up much of the night. As some Jews recall, the favor was often repaid on Shabbat (when Jews rest), when the women from the Muslim neighbors would come over to visit in the afternoon and make a fresh pot of tea.

Jewish-Muslim relations in Morocco were not perfect throughout history, and different experiences and memories are undoubtedly shaped by the particular social and political mood at the time (affecting Jewish-Muslim relations in general). Regardless, there are those who have, in recent years, actively sought to amplify the many positive memories and create new opportunities for constructive relations between Muslims and Jews.

Read also: [Moroccan Multi-Faith Iftar Brings Together 200](#)

Jews, Christians, and Muslims

In Mohammedia, for example, [annual multi-faith Iftars are organized](#) by the NGO “Marocains Pluriels” (Diverse Moroccans). [In Marrakech, Muslims have been welcomed by the Jewish community to celebrate joint Iftars at their synagogue, Slat Al Azama.](#) In 2017, for example, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews prepared and distributed to thousands of families in need food parcels including items typically enjoyed by Moroccan Muslims at Eid, like dates, pulses, and tea; they also gave out around 10,000 coupons for food and clothes before Eid. Mimouna Association organizes interfaith and educational events throughout the year.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 does not allow for large in-person gatherings in Morocco this year; however, online events allow for many more people, from across the globe, to meet and celebrate virtually. In Israel, where there are currently fewer restrictions, the annual [Ramadan Nights \(Layali Ramadan\) festival](#) is taking place. Celebrations include in-person and/or virtual visits (mostly by Jews) to Arab/Palestinian towns and villages throughout the country, joint Iftars and home hospitality, lectures and presentations on Islam, and more.

The history of Jewish-Muslim relations in Morocco, only superficially touched on here, is long and complex. However, it offers many precedents from which we can learn. Particularly with the rise in intolerance and hate crimes worldwide, Moroccan models of Jewish-Muslim coexistence – past and present - offer a promising future.

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