



Experiencing the World as Miss Universe Morocco

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On my way home, the taxi driver told me about the football game he had watched. The team he supported had lost. I, in turn, spoke to her about the event I had just attended, explaining to her that after 43 years of absence, Miss Morocco was now back on the Miss Universe contest card. When I told him of my second place, he, curiously, informed me that I could be called upon to represent Morocco in the event of an injury involving the winner of the first place. I immediately dismissed the idea, because I did not wish such a thing on Fatima Zahra, the newly crowned Miss Morocco. She carried the title beautifully and we were all so proud of her. I arrived home and continued my night telling my aunt and mother about the emotionally charged experience I had during the pageant, feeling like my grandmother was hovering above from me all the time.

Call it a premonition or fate – the taxi driver's words later came true which meant I was going to Israel to represent Morocco in the Miss Universe 2021 pageant. Life events aren't that arbitrary that they can be perceived, after all. Although Fatima Zahra's injury was unfortunate, I think it served to teach us different lessons. She kindly expressed her confidence in my abilities, her benevolent candor underlining her inner radiance. Today, she continues to thrive personally and professionally, and it was a real pleasure to witness it from afar.

Not everyone was supportive. The political climate around Israel and Palestine has always been delicate, and the fabric of the subject is still very fragile. So when the location of the Miss Universe event was announced, people immediately started expressing their displeasure on social media. At the same time, the political relationship between Algeria and Morocco was also sensitive, and my grandmother's Algerian roots created an additional problem for some people. As soon as I was announced as the new crowned Miss Morocco, a video of me sharing my grandmother's life story to demonstrate the power of choice sparked a public debate about my legitimacy as an ambassador from Morocco.

My name seemed to pop up suddenly in the news as some reporters were obviously looking to commodify the story. Others working in the media have described the phenomenon as a strategic maneuver to generate more "buzz" – a publicity stunt. On the other side of the screen, I continued to reflect on the notion of identity.

Jerusalem is described as the city of peace, but it harbors the pain and passions of various peoples. We walked along its historic streets marked with vestiges of religious heritage, a collection of temples, churches, mounts and mosques all over its surface, mapping something like a constellation. This route of sacred sites had more than nominal significance to me. As my ears rang with greetings "shalom" and "salam", I wished for just that: peace.

With over a million people in Israel of Moroccan Jewish ancestry, I was frequently approached by individuals who proudly expressed their family's Moroccan origins. They generously gave me tokens of appreciation, including my evening dress and various foods as well as smiles, hugs, songs, dances and cheers, sharing a deep-rooted sense of friendship. With a declining Moroccan Jewish population, his stories sounded like echoes of a distant past. I had educated myself and was aware of this history of my country, but the experience of being exposed to the number of people who came to me and expressed how Morocco's Jewish past is commemorated and celebrated was eye-opening. and wonderful.

One evening, Miss Universe 2020, Miss USA, Miss Israel and I all had the pleasure of dining at Eilat Mayor Eli Lankri's house. His wife, who was contagiously cheerful, had prepared an array of familiar dishes, including couscous and shebakiya. The melodies of an oud accompanied us as we talked about the childhood memories the hosts had formed in Morocco.



Stories that originated long before I existed have been passed down from generation to generation, so what once looked like echoes of the past have instead taken the form of symphonies. During my stay in Israel, I became fascinated by the land, by its juxtaposition of religions, by the fact that the nearby Dead Sea is the lowest point on Earth. I envisioned that maybe, just maybe, this mix of high and low created a unique midpoint, one that celebrates difference, coexistence and understanding.

Growing up, I attended an American school in the mornings and came home to speak Darija and French. I then extended my university course in France while pursuing an English-speaking program. Exploration was my first language and the cultural dichotomy I grew up in was where I felt most comfortable. The people I met during my stay, although they hadn't been to Morocco in years, considered themselves as Moroccan as any other Moroccan citizen. So how do you measure Moroccaness?

For me, being Moroccan means having the capacity to have room for two. To be Moroccan is to have freedom instilled in our biological schema. Adorned with colorful subtleties, our tables, tapestries, ceilings, floors and living rooms continue to celebrate our innate dynamism. The Moroccan walks to the end of his sentences with hope and gratitude. The Moroccan woman wears courage on her sleeve because she gracefully embodies freedom. Morocco is where despair gives way to faith and where cynicism is exchanged for a wise smile or a piece of warm homemade bread – empathy being the motto.

Kawtar Benhalima is the Miss Universe Morocco 2021 finalist. She is a passionate philanthropist, artist and entrepreneur who co-created a jewelry line with her sister. She earned a Bachelor of Business Administration from ESSEC Business School in Paris and has been involved in the world of identity expression and celebration since the age of 7. Ms. Benhalima has worked with various Moroccan associations working for education and the distribution of goods to people in need, including as a volunteer with the High Atlas Foundation. Today, she works for a French marketing agency and looks forward to pursuing higher education in the field of communication.



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