



*Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students*

**“The Jews of Morocco”**

**by Alicia Blum  
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Many of you have heard about Morocco from that great old movie *Casablanca* with Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart. Or maybe you have seen one of my favorite films - the Marx Brothers' *A Night in Casablanca*.

But did you know that Jews have lived in Morocco since the Roman Empire? Or that a legendary Jewish Berber princess fought the Moslem invasion? Or that one of the greatest medieval Jewish philosophers lived in Morocco? Or that some of the best Moroccan food is Jewish in origin?

In March, 2009, my family and I took a Jewish Heritage tour of Morocco. We had a wonderful tour guide who showed us many interesting sights. Today, I will be your tour guide - but I won't be shouting “Yella Yella” - “hurry up” - as I tell you about Jewish life in Morocco.

A little background: Morocco is an Arab Country. The main religion that they practice there is Islam. Even so, today Jews and Moroccans live in harmony. Morocco and Israel have had a good relationship. Morocco does not have a president like the U.S.A does - it has a King and his name is King Mohammed VI. He is also the religious leader of the country.

The temperature there is really hot. In the summer it can be extremely hot, well over 100 degrees. It wasn't so bad when we went.

But our tour begins with the Roman empire. While some people think that Jewish traders actually arrived before the Romans, other people believe that the Jews came in the first century, when revolts against the Romans were crushed and Jewish communities were destroyed. We visited the extraordinary Roman town called Volubilis, which had a large Jewish community. (It was destroyed by an earthquake in the fourth century.) It was an important outpost of the Roman Empire and has many beautiful buildings and mosaics. Extensive remains of these survive in the archaeological site, located in a fertile agricultural area which produced grain and olives. These products were exported to Rome, contributing to the province's wealth and prosperity.

Many Jews, however, took refuge in the mountains where they encountered local Berber tribes. The story is that these tribes were so impressed with Judaism that they converted. There were many Jewish Berbers, but most left for Israel in 1948 when the State of Israel was founded. Many Berber Jews lived in tents - and the menorahs they used hang from a rope across the tent - we actually bought one! You can still buy Berber rugs that were made by Jewish tribes.

We spent a night in a tent in the desert. I can tell you it was very cold - and very dark. We got up at dawn to ride the camels through the dunes. The pillow was made out of sand so I had bits of sand in my hair every morning.

The Jewish Berbers were the last people to resist the Arab invasions in the seventh century. They were led by the legendary Queen Kahina – the Prophetess. Very little is known about her – they don't even know if she was really Jewish. What is known is that soon after the Arab general Hassan took Carthage from the Byzantines, Queen Kahina's forces defeated him.. Hassan retreated, probably all the way back to Egypt. The Kahina took Carthage and ruled most of Berber North Africa. Unfortunately, Hassan returned and defeated her.

Today, soaps made of argan oil are named after her! Argan oil is made by the Berbers. Goats climb the argan tree and eat the fruit. The Berbers collect undigested argan pits from the goat poop. The pits are ground and pressed to make the nutty oil used in cooking and cosmetics. Yes, we bought it and yes my Mom cooked with it!

We went to a town in the Atlas Mountains where Queen Kahina fought - or so we were told. To get there, we had to cross a stream - on donkeys - and climb to the top of the mountain on foot! But the views were beautiful and you could see for miles and miles. Actually, Queen Kahina probably fought in Tunisia. But it is good story anyway - like many myths and legends, it becomes a part of nation's history and memories.

The Jews had their ups and downs during the period of the Arab conquest - depending on how tolerant the Arab rulers were. The town of Fez, which we visited, became a center of Jewish learning. The great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides lived in Fez - and we saw the place where he supposedly lived. There was a plaque on the door of an apartment. Maimonides was born in Spain, but his family had to leave - the choice was conversion, death or exile - they took exile. He later went to Egypt.

Things went downhill for the Jews after that. The Almohads - very religious Moslem Berbers from the Atlas mountains - took over. Jews were forced to convert or die. Many communities were destroyed. Jews asked to live in "Mellahs" - special quarters - like the European Ghettos. We visited the Mellah in Fez which is very near the royal palace, founded in 1438.

But things picked up again when the Jews from Spain arrived in 1492 after the expulsion from Christian Spain. If you remember, at this time the Moors were driven out of Granada, and shortly after that Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain expelled all the Jews from their lands and put an end to the largest and most distinguished Jewish settlement in Europe. Our guide said that Moroccan Jews and Arabs had many things in common - they both worship one god (in contrast to the Catholic Trinity) and were both booted out of Spain at the same time. (He didn't like the Spanish!) These Jews were very well educated and brought with them their own type of architecture, food and superior culture. They became great merchants, craftsmen and diplomats. Many became very wealthy. But their fortunes, too, declined with the economic decline of the Arab world.

So let me tell you about the culture that these Spanish Jewish refugees brought to Morocco.

Morocco has some very interesting food. They have their own dish called a Tajine. It is made in a special pottery pot - decorated nicely - in which the food is cooked. The food in the Tajine is usually beef, chicken, or lamb - no pork - neither traditional Jews nor Moslems eat pork. There is a special Tajine with only couscous and vegetables called the "Royal Couscous" . IT IS REALLY GOOD! I had it almost every time I could. Now the Jews from Spain added their own ingredients to the Tajine - dried fruits (prunes, raisins, pumpkin) and preserved lemons. You see these in many dishes in the restaurants - but they are Jewish in origin.

The Spanish Jews brought their own type of buildings to Morocco. The architecture of Morocco is spectacular!! It is so detailed and interesting. Did you know that in Mosques, decorations on columns and walls never have people or animals on it? Yes. It is true. It is forbidden to worship idols and Moslems believed that pictures would be like worshipping idols. All the Mosques are very nicely decorated from the top of the minaret to the front door step with different designs and colors. Even the doors of homes are decorated. Many of the decorations are words and sayings from the Koran. Jewish synagogues, too, are also beautiful inside with many colorful decorations.

Now, when you enter a Moslem home, you never enter directly into the house. There is a corridor that leads around to the central open courtyard with a fountain. Moslem women were never allowed outside of the home and Moslem husbands did not want other men to be able to see into the house. The Spanish Jewish homes look like their homes in Spain - large balconies on the upper floors where the women could go out and talk to their neighbors. So if you ever see a home in Morocco with a balcony - it was originally a Jewish home.

The Jews from Spain were given the rights to the mines and the rights to make gold and silver jewelry. They were wonderful artisans. Moslems are not allowed to charge interest on loans (that's called usury) and some scholars believe that Moslems thought that decorating gold and silver - which makes the gold and silver more valuable - was just like usury and against the religion. That is why the Jews became the greatest gold and silver workers in Morocco.

In the Fez Mellah today there are many jewelry shops. Most of them are gold and silver shops and may have originally been owned by Jews. I have been in one. The jewelry is very detailed and elaborate and also very colorful. They put many jewels in the objects that they make. They have tiny things like earrings to large things that look like chandeliers.

In KidSchool we learn about Jews from other countries and other time periods. So it was important to us - and, a lot of fun - to visit synagogues - both old and new. We saw Jewish cemeteries. We visited the tomb of a Jewish mystic - there were many of these Jewish saints in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But one thing we didn't see - Jewish people! In 1948, there were over a quarter of a million Jews in Morocco. Today, fewer than 7,000 Jews live in Morocco, mostly in Casablanca and Fez, and mostly an elderly population. Most of the Jewish population has moved to Israel, where they make up the largest group of Sephardic Jews in Israel. Today, there are close to a million Moroccan Jews in Israel - 15% of the population! The Moroccan Jewish population is very religious, so moving to Israel was something the population very much wanted to do after the State of Israel was founded.

Morocco to me was a really *different* place. I felt a little un-comfortable there. People kept on staring at me. I felt self-conscious. I kept looking at myself, thinking am I dressed weird (I guess I was, to some people there) or is my hair messed up. Anyway, I did not feel that weird about being a Jew there, even though their religion is different from mine. After all, Jews have lived in Morocco for close to two thousand years and Morocco and Israel have good relations. To tell you the truth, I was too busy looking at the Mosques, smelling the food and trying to understand what people were saying to me on the streets! It was a great trip - a little scary - but I am glad that we went.

For our next trip, we will be traveling with the Jewish Federation of North America on a Family Mission to Israel. I am hoping that we can meet some of the Moroccan Jews who now live in Israel. I will have the chance to compare what life was like for Jews in an Arab country, with life today in Israel. I hope the food there is just as good!