In the lexicon of Muslim-Jewish relations in Morocco, no single word is more redolent with meaning than the word *mellah*, the Jewish quarter of the Moroccan town. In the popular mind, the mellah was synonymous with Jewish society, representing the subordinate and separate status of Morocco’s single largest religious minority. To many European visitors, the mellah evoked an image of the forlorn ghettos of the Middle Ages. French diplomat Eugène Aubin, writing at the turn of the last century, recognized the distinctions to be made between mellahs of the coast and those of the interior, noting, however, that all were similar in one respect: within their walls “the great mass of the Jewish population continues to live in poverty and squalor. The Mellahs are overpopulated ... [their] filth and stench ... make them hotbeds of frequent epidemics.” The Jewish quarter of Essaouira was especially shocking, giving the impression of “a human anthill ... it is a squalid, wretched place, where one does not breathe freely except on the terraces, where a whole regiment of women and children take the air.”

This scene of abject poverty was the exterior face of a complex urbanity shaped by longstanding social and formal arrangements. Architecturally, the mellah was a unit distinct from the rest of the town, surrounded by high walls and heavy gates. In a city made up of enclosures, it was a small enclave within the greater encirclement of the outer walls. Administratively, it had its own governing hierarchy responsible for taxes, decorum, and public safety, its own shops and markets, its own tempo of social and religious life. The first Jewish quarter was created in Fez in the fifteenth century; other mellahs followed in later centuries. What was distinctive about the Jewish quarter, how it fitted into the urban landscape, and what kind of segregation it implied, are important questions not yet fully answered. Some historians argue that Jews welcomed the security of a closed quarter, while others cite texts that speak of their forced removal from the Muslim town as a calamity. Whether construed as a prison or a safe haven, or some combination of both, the mellah felt like alternative space, subject to its own rhythms, rules, and practices.2

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In Moroccan parlance as well as in some Western minds, the mellah became a metaphor for the removal of Jews from the mainstream of social life. Along with distinctive dress, special taxes, and other restrictions, the enclosing walls of the mellah became a signifier of Jewish “otherness,” a charged symbol representing the alienation of Jews from the wider society. Citing the “highly consistent” testimony of nineteenth-century European visitors, American historian Norman Stillman speaks of the “pariah” status of Jews in pre-modern Morocco and of their “highly ritualized degradation in the major towns and cities.”

Nationalist historians of an indigenous cast adopted a different point of view, arguing that the Jewish exit from the mellah was a revolt against the social compact that traditionally had governed Muslim–Jewish affairs. Moroccan sociologist Abdallah Laroui, commenting on “the end of Islamic sovereignty” in nineteenth-century Morocco, laid some of the blame for its dissolution at the doorstep of the mellah. The Jewish passion to westernize, he declared, allowed Jews to “escape from the situation of the Muslims” and to engage in “arrogance and rebellion” against the ruling authority.

Whether one rejoiced in Jewish emancipation or lamented it, the underlying assumption was that flight from the Jewish quarter was an inevitable consequence of modernity, a symptom as well as a cause of the widening gulf between Jews and the Muslim majority.

The difficulty with interpretations based solely on Moroccan and European sources is that they reduce the Jewish experience to a subsidiary factor in the evolution of larger issues like the progress of Jewish Westernization, or the rise of Moroccan nationalism. The Jewish response to the city becomes enmeshed in historical discourses external to itself, rather than being considered as a component of a central debate within the Jewish community about religiosity versus secularization that was much closer to home. This debate consumed Moroccan Jewish intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century and shaped their attitudes on important issues of the day. Our interest here is in imagining the urban situation from a Jewish perspective: how Jews construed their ties with Muslims, how they defined themselves vis-à-vis the wider society, how external relations were tempered by internal dynamics, how Jews developed their own particular perspective on life in the city (Figure 6.1).