Chapter 12

How Jews Became “Moroccan”

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In the Moroccan constitution of 2011—the response of King Mohammed VI to Morocco’s “Arab Spring”—the preamble states: “A sovereign Muslim state, committed to its national unity and its territorial integrity, the Kingdom of Morocco intends to preserve, in its fullness and diversity, its one and indivisible national identity. Its unity, forged by the convergence of its Arabo-Islamic, Amazigh, and Hassani-Saharan components, is nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Jewish [hébraïque] and Mediterranean influences.”¹

In the official discourse of the king, Jews are one of the many components that constitute the Moroccan nation. If Jews are represented officially at the very core of the Moroccan nation, it is not because of the actual presence of Jews in Morocco in the second decade of the twenty-first century, who number under 5,000, nor does this recognition have much to do with the more recent history of the Jews in Morocco in the era before their mass emigration in the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, it harkens back to the more distant past, the Andalusian age of convivencia, the symbol of interfaith dialogue. The idea that the Moroccan nation is infused with Jewish influence has no resonance for the vast majority of Moroccans. Yet representing Jews as an important component of being Moroccan, in the near disappearance of actual Jews in the country, serves as an important symbol of pluralism for the educated elite and for the kingdom, the public face of a liberal, tolerant, and open society presented to the wider world.²

If Jewish influence is celebrated as one of the strands in the Moroccan tapestry in elite discourse, the “Moroccanness” of the Jews of Morocco is also something assumed in much of the scholarly literature. In a well-known essay on the Moroccan suq, Clifford Geertz writes about the paradox of the Moroccanness of the Jewish community of the town of Sefrou: “from many points of view it looks exactly like the Muslim community; from as many others, totally

different [...] Moroccan to the core and Jewish to the same core, they were heriters of a tradition double and indivisible and in no way marginal.3 Moroccan Jews have been the subject of numerous studies, most of which would agree with Geertz’s assessment. Yet what are the characteristics of this “Moroccan” Jewish core that so many scholars have assumed to be embedded in Moroccan society and culture? While scholars debate the similarities and differences between Muslim and Jews of Morocco and whether Muslim-Jewish relations were either relatively harmonious or fraught with tensions, very few question the essential Moroccaness of the Jews. Many contemporary Jews whose origins are from Morocco and who understand their Moroccaness as an identity deeply rooted in Moroccan soil share this general perception. Of all the Jews from the Islamic world, the tenacity of Moroccan Jews’ sense of attachment to their country of origins is perhaps unparalleled.

Less well known, and arguably somewhat misunderstood, is how Jews came to identify themselves as “Moroccan.” It was not before the late nineteenth century that an elite of Western educated Jews, living in a number of urban centers of Morocco, began to regard themselves as part of a single Moroccan Jewish community within the geographical confines of the country known as Morocco.4 This was a new idea, influenced by the idea of the nation state, but translated into the reality of nineteenth-century Morocco, which was governed by the Alawids, a dynasty believed to be sharifs (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad). As everywhere in the pre-modern Islamic world, Jews were legally defined as dhimmis, non-Muslims who benefited from the protection of the Muslim ruler whose duty was to safeguard his protégés. Apart from this status as dhimmi subjects of the sultan, there was no institutional structure that united Moroccan Jewry as a whole. Yet identification with one’s country was increasingly, for the modernizing Jewish elite, the sine qua non of modernity.

It is useful to mention what such an imagining was not. In this self-definition of Moroccan Jewry, the idea of being “Arab” was nowhere to be found.5 This is not surprising, for even among the Muslim population, the idea that Morocco