

# BEYOND EXOTICISM AND SYNCRETISM: SITUATING MOROCCAN JEWISH PILGRIMAGE IN JEWISH STUDIES

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Aside from demonstrating the diversity of Jewish experience in its broad historical and geographic scope, what can research on North African cases add to Jewish studies? And, as a step towards answering this question, where have such cases been situated in the field? These have been the questions and concerns that have occupied me as I bring my anthropological research on Moroccan Jewish saints and pilgrimage into dialogue with Jewish studies.

Morocco, of course, does not represent the North African Jewish world in its entirety, nor is saint pilgrimage the only regional phenomenon that has attracted scholarly attention. Yet, Moroccan hagiographic practices and beliefs are of particular interest here because they are often taken, in popular and academic discourses alike, as exemplars of North African Jewish specificity. Over the past century, Moroccan Jewish saint veneration has often been made to appear interesting through two major tropes. One, which might be called exoticism, emphasizes the apparent otherness of Moroccan saint traditions with respect to a modern Ashkenazi center, which in its bluntest formulation has been cast as

authentic Judaism itself. The other, which we can call syncretism, highlights the cultural commonalities and social interactions which link Moroccan Jewish traditions with similar Muslim ones. The two tropes,



Shrine of Rabbi David Ben Barukh, region of Taroudant, Morocco.  
Courtesy of Oren Kosansky.

moreover, are related. It is largely by virtue of the putative Islamic influences on popular Judaic practice in Morocco that saint pilgrimage has often been cast beyond the pale of normative Judaism.

Admittedly, my own ethnographic and historical research in some ways reinforces the notion that Morocco is interesting for Jewish studies primarily via the case of pilgrimage. My aim, however, has been to take a critical approach to these tropes, partly by suggesting alternatives to exoticism and partly by tracing the genealogical

development of syncretism with respect to saint pilgrimage in Morocco. In its ethnographic mode, my research focuses on the ways in which Jews in contemporary Morocco experience, perform, and conceptualize their relationships with saints. Beginning with the perspectives of social actors themselves, I have been developing a series of ethnographically grounded arguments that situate pilgrimage squarely in the domain of what I call *Torah practice*. This domain includes liturgical, textual, pedagogical, and exegetical activities through which Moroccan Jews, men in particular, engage Torah as the central medium of Jewish experience. At the center of this domain is pilgrimage itself, which is neither a substitute for nor an artificial

adjunct to Torah practice, but rather an integral expression of it. On the one hand, shrine spaces are made sacred through Torah-centered elements such as synagogues, *genizot*, and the graves of saint-sages, each of which are the objects of attendant halakic activities during the course of pilgrimages. Pilgrimages provide one of the most intense contexts in which such things as Sabbath prayer, Torah sermons, ritual slaughter, respect for Torah, honoring sages, charity, and so forth are

enacted. Pilgrimage, in sum, does not exist aside from halakic practice, nor are shrines alternative to synagogues. Rather, all of these ritual arenas are deeply imbricated and mutually constituted in the lives of Moroccan Jews who put their faith in the enduring power of sainted rabbis.

On the other hand, the rituals that are distinctive to pilgrimage events (*hillulot*) assume forms that are both models of and models for Torah practice in other contexts. This process is most clearly evident in representations and rituals in which:

1) the entombed bodies of deceased saints are treated as Torah scrolls;  
2) the saints' shrines assume the form of the Torah ark; and  
3) core pilgrimage rituals mirror the liturgical Torah service. Shrines and pilgrimages,

moreover, are not the only contexts in which Moroccan Jews encounter their sainted rabbis.

Hagiographic stories are written and published in textual forms that adhere to the conventions of rabbinic literary genres. Such texts, along with hagiographic poems composed as

*piyyutim*, are treated, read, and learned as Torah during pilgrimages, in study groups (*hevrot*), and in synagogues. Pictorial icons manifest the sacred, concrete form of saints just as scrolls in synagogues manifest the words of Torah in their most sensual and ritually charged form. Hagiographic icons are themselves often framed in velvet-embroidered matting, crafted in the same style as the mantles that encase Torah scrolls. Such icons, to follow further this metaphorical linkage between saints and Torah scrolls, are addressed with ritual gestures that are also enacted in the choreography of the Torah service.

Given these patterns, it should not be surprising that Moroccan Jewish men who invest themselves in the worlds of saints and pilgrimage do not generally conceive of their commitments in anything other than familiar, Judaic, and more specifically Torah-centered, terms. This does not necessarily represent ignorance of neighboring Muslim rituals that take on similar forms and that rely on similar ideologies of saintly power and intercession. Rather, Moroccan Jews

have at their disposal an elaborate and sufficient set of Judaic ideas and practices through which to constitute and understand their interactions with saints as Torah scholars, miracle workers, and divine mediators. Rather



Praying by the grave of a tzaddik.  
Courtesy of Oren Kosansky.

than beginning with the similarities between Jewish and Muslim hagiographic traditions in Morocco, I begin, as do many Moroccan devotees themselves, with the similarities between Jewish hagiographic traditions and the other domains of Judaic life upon which they draw and to which they contribute.

What, then, of syncretism and the relationship between Jewish and Muslim saint traditions in Morocco? There is little doubt that the particular forms and ideological underpinnings of Jewish saint traditions in Morocco developed through interaction with Muslim parallels. At a sociological level, much has been made of the veneration of common Muslim and Jewish saints by members of both communities, a pattern which harkens to both Sufi and kabbalistic attentiveness to the prolific distribution of holiness in the world. The sociology of mutual saint veneration in the present (and I would venture to say in the past as well) is

more complicated than suggested by certain romanticized glosses, but there nevertheless continues to be a certain amount of cross- veneration and common pilgrimage. There is nothing categorically incorrect about such observations, but what interests me most are the specific historical conditions under which Judeo-Muslim syncretism comes to be taken as the most significant feature of Jewish pilgrimage in Morocco.

Two examples drawn from different moments in the recent history of Morocco and tied to different political projects can illuminate what I have in mind. In 1948, a French colonial



Reading Psalms by the grave of Rabbi Amram Ben Divan.  
Courtesy of Oren Kosansky.

ethnographer by the name of Louis Voinot published a volume entitled *Judeo-Muslim Pilgrimages of Morocco* in which the phenomenon at hand was taken as nothing less than a perfect example of Moroccan culture in its most authentic form. As the book's title suggests, that form is fundamentally syncretic. One implication of this characterization, as developed in this text and others, is that whatever unity Morocco may appear to have (e.g., Muslim and Arab) is in fact disrupted by myriad historical forces and heterogeneous elements (e.g., Jewish) that constitute Moroccan culture and society. In this vein, the imputed syncretism of Judeo-Muslim pilgrimage contributed to more general colonial discourses, which attributed to Morocco enough unity

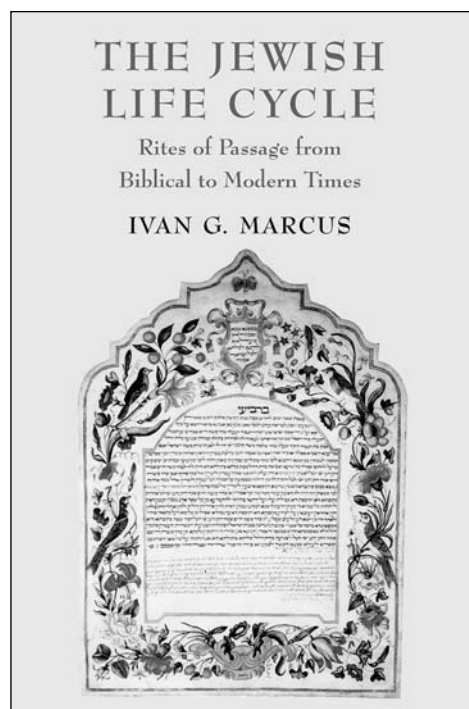
and distinctiveness to be construed as an authentic nation, yet not so much unity to provide the foundation for common interests and possible resistance to imperial rule. Syncretism, that is, was a useful notion in the politics of French colonial knowledge.

Despite the radically changed political circumstances of the late twentieth century, pilgrimage remains an emblem of Moroccan national society, and syncretism remains one key motif in public representations of *hillulot*. At one level, the persistence of Jewish pilgrimage traditions in postcolonial Morocco provides an opportunity for the Moroccan state to project, on an increasingly global stage, its tolerance of religious minorities. At yet another level, saint pilgrimage is officially portrayed as a longstanding and distinctive national tradition that transcends Muslim and Jewish difference. The hyphenated label *Judeo-Muslim* is carried over from colonial discourse, but now it is used to very different effect as an emblem of

the tolerance, pluralism, and transcendence that characterizes Morocco as a liberal nation-state. These are only some of the valences that have contributed to the resilience of syncretism as a dominant sign of Moroccan Jewish pilgrimage over the past century. My point is that we need to take a critical look at the reflex to import Moroccan Jewish pilgrimage into the general discourse of Jewish studies as an example of interactions between Jewish society and its exotic, non-Jewish contexts. We must ask not only what insights this reflex provides but also what insights it excludes. It may be true that we can learn much from cases like Moroccan saint pilgrimage about the relationships between Jewish cultural life and the broader environment in which it is found. But why privilege these kinds of relationships over others when dealing with the North African context, and popular practices in particular? I have suggested two alternative approaches, one which attends to saint pilgrimage as experienced in the context of local

Judaic life and the other which investigates the historical situations in which Judeo-Muslim interaction has dominated discourses about pilgrimage. There is, by way of conclusion, a third approach. What of the relationships, similarities, and historical linkages between Judeo-Moroccan saint traditions and eastern European ones? There is suggestive evidence—in the content of hagiographic narratives, in the forms of hagiographic literature, in the style of hagiographic iconography, and in the well-established Mediterranean networks of rabbinic contact—that Hassidism, as much as Moroccan Sufism, was a significant factor in the development of modern saint traditions in Morocco. And if this is the case then we must reconsider entirely the nature of the otherness and syncretism that Moroccan saint traditions represent.

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