

DIARNA: DIGITALLY MAPPING MIZRAHI HERITAGE

Frances Malino and Jason Guberman-Pfeffer Jewish communities that once

On a dusty side street in Tunis, above a solitary locked doorway, one can still see a faded Hebrew plaque. This plaque is all that remains of the tomb of Chief Rabbi Messaoud Raphael el Fassi. According to tradition, el Fassi set off on a caravan bound for Jerusalem from his native city of Fez. He made it as far as Tunis, where he died in 1775.

In December 2008, Ali Kaba, a West African-Muslim undergraduate, located this plaque on a research expedition for Diarna (“Our homes” in Judeo-

Arabic), a new initiative dedicated to mapping Mizrahi heritage. A collaboration among scholars, social entrepreneurs, Google Earth developers, and Middle Eastern researchers, Diarna underlines the importance of physical location to understanding the past. By locating hundreds of sites, collecting old and new photographs of these sites, interviewing current and former community residents, and assembling a multimedia layer in Google Earth, we are able both to virtually preserve Mizrahi heritage and to make it accessible in a myriad of popular educational formats.

Mizrahi communities from Saharan outposts in southern Morocco to Kurdish villages in Iran are rapidly disappearing. The synagogues,

cemeteries, schools, clubs, and traditional tombs of biblical figures stand as testament to the vibrant

Jewish communities that once spanned the entire region.

While the majority of these communities ceased to exist only within the past few decades, it remains difficult to visit and often impossible to preserve their communal sites. As these sites decay and those with knowledge of them pass on, future generations are losing tangible connections to communities that once contributed significantly both to Jewish and world culture.

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Mizrahim have recently launched Web forums where visitors post old photographs and memories of their hometowns. These websites are being discovered by a new generation growing up in cities devoid of their former Jewish communities. Some of these young Muslims have begun posting contemporary photos of Jewish communal sites, at times even meeting requests from their former Jewish neighbors to photograph family graves and other nostalgic locales. This interaction yields valuable data on the past and present status of Jewish communal sites.

For a number of young Arabs, Berbers, Kurds, and Persians, the hidden history of their region’s Jewish heritage is a source of

fascination. As Shaymaa Salama, a young Egyptian-Muslim researcher for Diarna, commented: “We never learned about this. Discovering dozens of Jewish sites in Cairo and even in small villages in the Nile Delta is eye-opening.” For others, that Jews once lived among them seems unfathomable. As one young Sudanese commented on a Diarna YouTube video, which features footage of Khartoum’s abandoned Jewish cemetery: “I have never heard that Jews were living in Sudan . . . and died there as well! Come on, be real, man. This is not Sudan.”

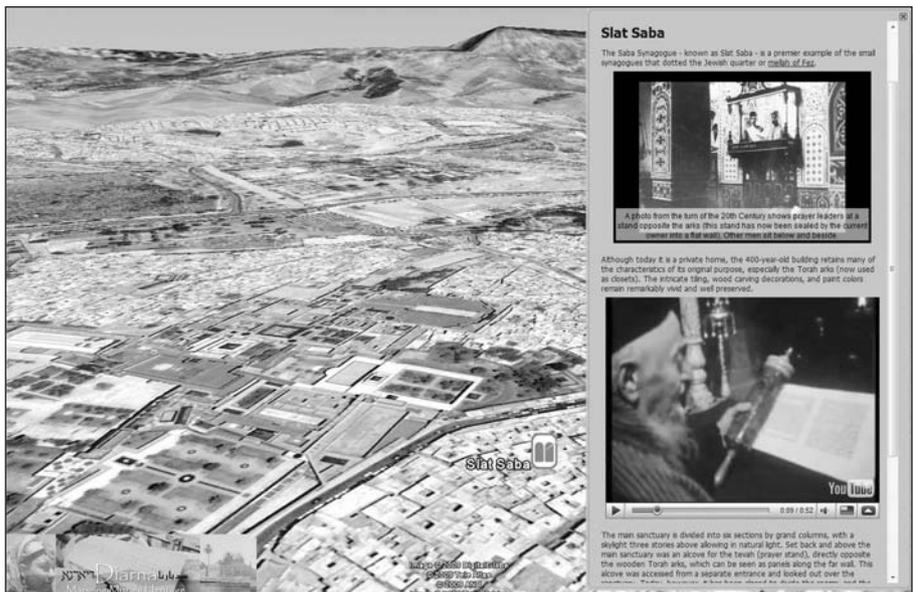
While we are in a race against time to identify and document Mizrahi sites, powerful new assets are now at our disposal: user-driven Web 2.0

technology.

Google Earth, a free program providing interactive satellite imagery of the entire globe to an audience of 500 million users, allows anyone with an Internet

connection to travel like a bird across the Middle East, unencumbered by political and security restrictions. All sorts of Jewish sites are clearly visible and “visitable” in a previously unimaginable way. Google Earth offers zoomable perspective, tilttable views, 360-degree rotation, and even three-dimensional modeling of buildings.

Diarna is assembling an interactive map, stored in an online database format and plotted directly onto Google Earth. For each site there will be a multimedia place-marker featuring a brief summary of its importance as well as archival and contemporary photos, video testimony, and embedded links to books, articles, and media. Additionally, some sites will be



Screenshot of the upcoming Diarna website.

“rebuilt” as 3D models, thus enabling the virtual reconstruction of outstanding Mizrahi sites.

Diarna’s multinational and interfaith coalition is composed of experts on the Mizrahim, coders and designers of the Diarna infrastructure, photographers and researchers who travel in the region collecting material, and Middle Eastern youth eager to map virtual common ground. From an academic standpoint, Diarna offers a cutting-

Earth layer, and a website. The result will be a model for digital preservation applicable to communities, however defined, around the world.

Demanding a fusion of academic, technological, and entrepreneurial skills, Diarna is a joint initiative between the start-up nonprofit Digital Heritage Mapping and Wellesley College’s Jewish studies program. Research institutions, including Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, as

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edge addition to historiography and pedagogy by injecting geo-spatial positioning coupled with multimedia to document communities now recognizable only by remnants of abandoned property. From a technical perspective, the project is producing an open-source package linking a research database, multimedia archives, a Google

well as leading international photographers, have agreed to share materials.

Highlights of the hundreds of sites already identified include:

- Aleppo’s Great Synagogue, which for centuries housed the legendary Codex

- Baghdad’s only remaining Jewish cemetery, adjacent to Sadr City
- The abandoned synagogue in Ghardaya, a remote outpost in the Algerian Sahara
- The ancient Jewish fortresses of the Khaybar oasis in Saudi Arabia
- The tomb of the Baba Sali’s father, the Abir Yaakov, in Damanhur, Egypt
- Foum Deflah, a Vichy “discipline camp” in the desert outside Figuig, Morocco
- Jewish cave-dwellers’ homes in Gharyan, Libya
- The Hasmonean fortress of Machaerus, and accompanying First Revolt–era Roman siege camps, in Jordan
- The Alliance Israélite Universelle “Hafsia” boys school in Tunis, Tunisia
- Jewish cemeteries in Kuwait, Oman, and Sudan
- The Frank Iny School and Ezra Menachem Daniel Sports Club in Baghdad
- The traditional tomb of Esther and Mordechai near Imam Khomeini square in Hamadan, Iran
- The synagogue where Maimonides was initially buried in Cairo’s Harat el-Yahud

Examining sites in Google Earth’s three-dimensional form can be awe-inspiring as well as informative. For example, until 1950, on the holiday of Shavuot, hundreds of Kurdish Jews would visit the traditional “Tomb of Nachum,” and then make a morning ascent up the hill,

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which they called “Mount Sinai.” After a ceremony at the summit, they would descend in a jubilant procession, banging drums and even brandishing swords in a dramatic “pre-enactment” of the battle of Armageddon. When viewed with Diarna’s Google Earth layer, the hagiography of Nachum’s tomb, located at the foot of this spectacular hill in the Iraqi Kurdish village of al-Qosh, is greatly enhanced.

Diarna is currently in start-up mode, with technical designers and

researchers still assembling essential materials for a public launch. Over the next year, we intend to complete mapping of at least five hundred sites, amass a photo collection in a searchable database with at least two thousand photographs, and create twenty model sites complete with three-dimensional models and translated site write-ups in Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, and French. A key milestone will be the release of a public Google Earth layer, which will anchor additional public educational materials such as virtual guided tours and interactive exhibits.

We anticipate that experts who have studied individual communities will contribute to our effort. Researchers who did field work, for example, in Morocco in the 1960s or Iran in the 1970s may have valuable information on communal sites. Diarna’s model, of course, can also be applied to mapping Jewish heritage around the world. Omer Bartov’s recent *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton University Press, 2007) offers a timely reminder that digital heritage mapping may be the only way to preserve some Jewish sites.

Frances Malino is the Sophia Moses Robison Professor of Jewish Studies and History at Wellesley College. Jason Guberman-Pfeffer is the executive director of Digital Heritage Mapping and project coordinator of Diarna. To learn more about their project, including how to contribute research results, e-mail info@heritagemapping.org.

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Aaron M. Schreiber has been a tenured Professor of Law at leading American law schools, and was a founding faculty member of the Faculty of Law at Bar-Ilan University, in Israel. He has a Master of Laws degree and a Doctorate of Juridical Science (JSD) degree from Yale Law School, in addition to a Doctor Juris, and is an ordained rabbi.

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