



jewish
RENAISSANCE

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON JEWISH CULTURE

JR Tours

Magical Morocco

17-24 March 2019

Group Diary





Monday 18 March

Perhaps it was a mistake to be the first person on this trip to Morocco to write up a daily diary. Perhaps David was hoping that this first contribution would be mainstream, describing the places we visited today, like the Jewish cemetery, the *Mellah*, the *Medinah*, the King's Palace and the many skilled craftspeople we saw in action.

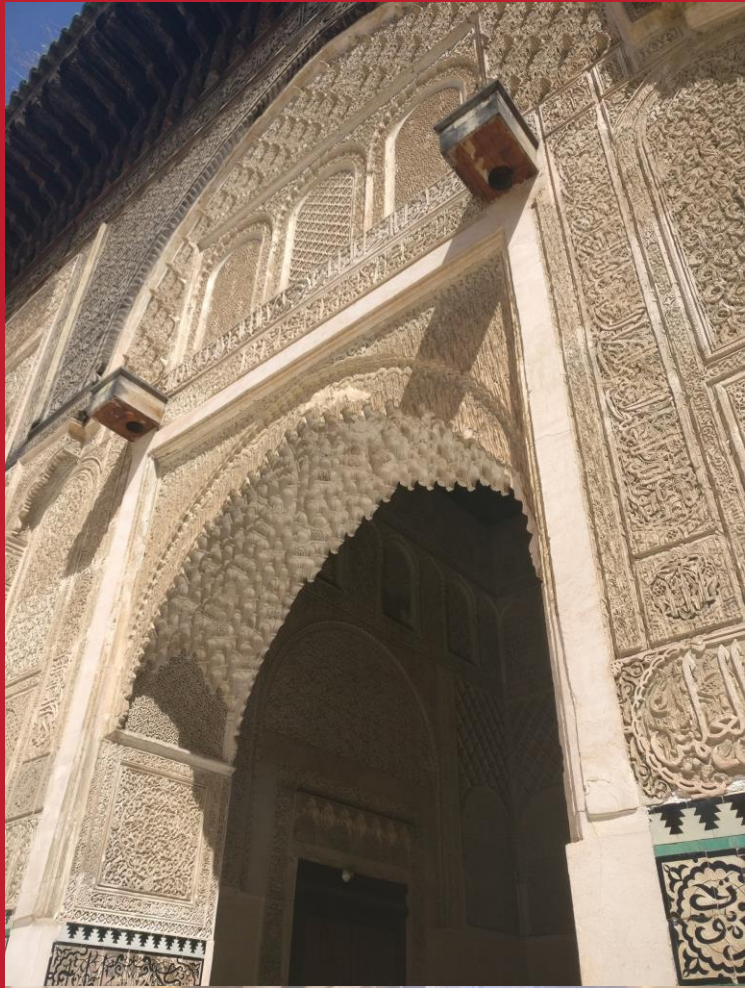
But I'm a woman on a mission. Ever since my previous visit to Morocco, when I became aware that Jews have a very long history in this country, I've been fascinated to find out why virtually all of them left in the 1960s. Rafi's book *Jews Under Moroccan Skies* gave the impression that the reason was more to do with Moroccan Jews being drawn by Zionism than because of their being made to feel unwelcome in Morocco. As we ate a meal at the Maimonides Club in Fes at the end of the first full day of our trip, I had the opportunity to ask Rafi about this and he confirmed that this was his belief.

Our subsequent conversation set me thinking about identity and values. Rafi is clearly as proud of being Moroccan as he is of being Jewish, just as I'm proud of being Scottish, because we both believe that our countries encourage tolerance. His description of the newly arrived Moroccan Jews being treated as second class citizens by Israeli society reminded me how British society treated the Windrush generation. Both Britain and Israel needed immigrants to boost the working population, but they weren't prepared to make them feel welcome.

Countries all over the world continue to struggle with the problems of immigration and the value that people can bring when they move to a new country. It is a measure of the status of a nation as to how it handles these challenges to ensure that old and new citizens can live peacefully side by side.

Janet











Tuesday 19 March

We left Fez on a boulevard lined with orange trees, only good for making marmalade according to Rafi. We were driving first to the Roman city of Volubilis, and then on to Meknes.

Volubilis is a UNESCO World Heritage site and both its size and the beauty of its mosaics made it a fascinating stop on our journey. The Carthaginians founded Volubilis in the third century BC and it became a prosperous city thanks to the resources and trade on the Mediterranean coast. It was then the capital of the Kingdom of Tingirana Mauritania during the reign of the Berber King Juba II, an ally of Rome. Remnants of this period remain, but it is mainly a Roman site with its magnificent mosaics, its Arc de Triomphe, thermal baths, temple of Venus and opulent patrician villas.

Volubilis was excavated by the French beginning in 1915. The lower part where the majority of the population lived has still to be excavated. At its height Volubilis has a population of 20,000 and covered an area of 42 hectares. Jews and Christians lived there, probably as slaves. The earthquake of 1755 resulted in the last inhabitants leaving Volubilis.

Also found on the site were more than 60 olive oil presses and 100 grain mills. How agriculture prospered was easy to imagine when our guide told us there had been no rain for two months but the area surrounding the Roman ruins were green and lush.

As we travelled on to Meknes we drove through fertile agriculture land. While it was impossible to identify what was growing, other than olive trees, the land was clearly very productive.

Meknes is the 3rd Imperial City of Morocco and was founded in the 16th century by the Ismaili dynasty and, according to Rafi, a rather eccentric king. He built two walls around the city, had 100 wives and concubines and 1000 children. He loved horses, we could see the remains of the stables as well as the enormous pool created for them (now used to irrigate olive trees). We walked around the mellah, or Jewish Quarter, and the market in the Medina. The Jewish population of 28,000 is now reduced to 35, only 4 of whom live in the Mellah. In 1912, when the French arrived and created the protectorate, they built La Ville Nouvelle outside the city walls and along French lines, which is where the rest of the city's Jews live. The synagogue only operates on shabbat.

Opposite a beautiful gate to the city created by Mr Mansouri (who was killed by the king so he could never create another gate as beautiful) was a large open space which had been a market for slaves and women. It is now where people come to buy natural/traditional remedies.

On day two of our tour certain things strike me that have little to do with historical commentaries. First, Rafi's immense pride in Morocco and his determination to ensure its Jewish heritage is not only not lost but is revived. Two, that Rafi, with his booming voice (necessary to manage 19 Jews) has no concerns about talking about Jewish things in the open. Third, that Rafi knows 'everyone'! Fourth, that Jewish tourism is so important to Morocco, that craft shops sell kiddush cups, tiles with Magen Davids and Chanukkihs. Furthermore, every person touting for business can do it in Hebrew, as well as French, English, etc.

Although Jewish history in Morocco has had its ups and downs over the centuries, depending heavily on the attitudes of the Monarchy, it seems clear that Mohammed VI supports his Jewish citizens as equals and efforts to revive their past.

Betty





Wednesday 20 March

A day of contrasts – first dazzled by marble and gold of the immense mausoleum of Mohammed V, liberator from the French occupation in 1956. The Jews were active in helping the king to regain his throne and remembered how in the 1940s he had signed a letter to Hitler: “I will not give my citizens to the Germans”.

In 1967 when the king died things became adverse for the Jews and this is when many went to Israel but remained nostalgic for their Berber homelands.

How splendid is the great tomb and sacred structure surrounding it in homage to this revered king! All of the highly elaborate decoration has been devotedly crafted by hand. First you see at the gate massive Arab houses decked out in black and gold, and at each side of the gate a mounted security guard in brilliant scarlet and gold sits on his horse.

For the great glittering monument, the Shah of Iran promised marble from his country and Italy furnished the vast chandeliers.

All the golden surfaces are covered in elaborate carving and all around the building, inside and outside, calligraphic decoration is made up of Koranic verses. The white sarcophagus invites meditation from gazers.

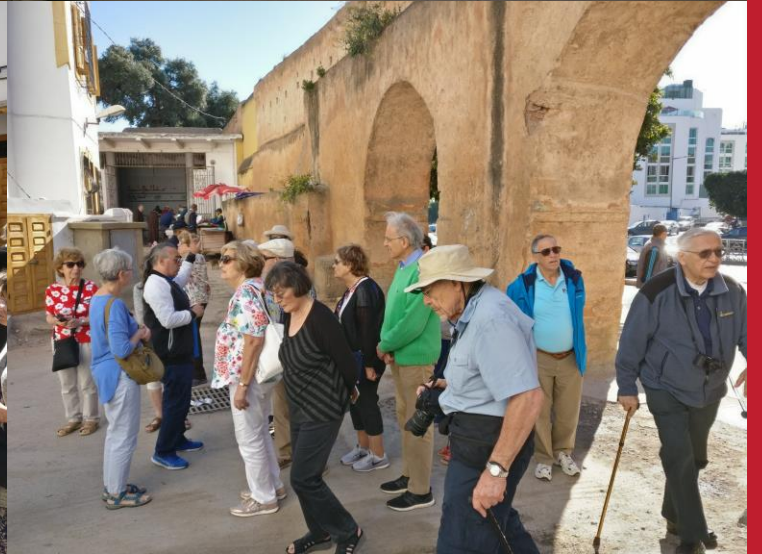
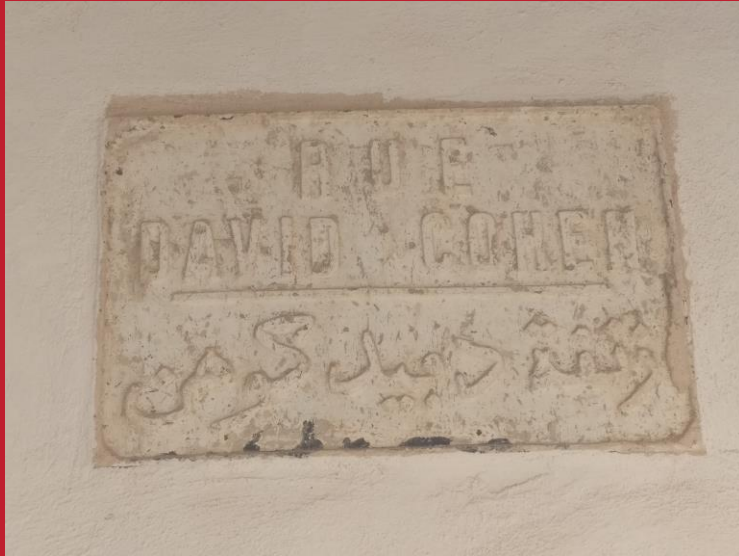
After we wandered in the Jewish Quarter, what a change is here. From 16,000 Jews in 1912 to 2000 today. One of these is the supervisor of the Kosher butchery and his wife invited the group up to see a solitary Jewish family home in a street once teeming with Jews. The area is now being restored for modern habitation. The rooms of the house were small and airy, one leading off another, all neat and clean with decorative tiles lining the staircase.

Next, it was “meet me in the Kasbah..!”. A seventeenth century fortress still full of mysterious pathways, secret doors in the wall for the slaves and concubines of viziers of old. We looked over ramparts into the surging sea and then walked through elegant gardens with a fountain and trees. As girls wandered the paths, the vizier would beckon to his attendant and indicate which girl caught his fancy for “tea and a chat this time!”.

Now on to romantic Casablanca along the Atlantic Ocean past Rick’s Café (a replica of the one in the famous film) and negotiating much stationary traffic. We stopped at La Terrasse café on the sea front, a secret haven with a view for lunch. Casablanca, originally built by the Portuguese, is the biggest port in Africa. Ninety thousand Jews once thrived in its industries and trades. But there are still 28 active synagogues, 18 of which can get a minyan for services. Yet, only 2300 Jews still live here – but clearly are proud and open in this religion. There are 18 Kosher butchers for example!

Finally to our ultra-luxury hotel, Le Casablanca, to take a delightful and hedonistic few hours by the pool, before heading to a private Jewish club for a delicious kosher meal to bring in the Purim festival.

Helen









Thursday 21 March

Purim day and we awoke in the fabulous Le Casablanca hotel. But no morning Megillah reading for us, rather a trip to the Hassan II mosque (just don't tell our rabbis!)

The mosque, the world's third largest after Mecca and Madinah, was designed by a French architect, a non-Muslim and close friend of the king. Its splendour is made entirely of Moroccan materials, save for the chandeliers (Murano glass from Italy) and a small amount of marble. The chandeliers are suitably gargantuan, befitting the vast central hall and we were reassured by our guide that they can be electronically lowered for cleaning purposes.

The hall itself caters to 25,000 worshippers, including 5,000 women in the upstairs gallery (alas, there was no mention of a Ladies' Guild). This immense building took 6 years to build, has heated floors, a retractable roof in lieu of air-conditioning (used during Ramadan) and has the tallest minaret in the world (approx. 200m and the first to feature a lift). Let's not mention how much it cost to build...

Before 1948 there were 350,000 Jews in Morocco. Subsequently, 175,000 Moroccan Jews emigrated to Israel, Canada and France. The majority of those left eventually went to Israel in 1967. After 1952 the Jews were given independence and could live anywhere in Morocco.

There remain 2,400 Jews in Casablanca, whilst other cities such as Fez, Rabat and Marrakesh, have only a few Jews. In Casablanca, there are 5 Jewish schools, 3 Jewish clubs, 18 kosher butchers, 4 kosher bakers, a Jewish hospital and an old age home. In and around one street in Casablanca there are 8 synagogues, most of which continue to hold services at different times of the day. There is nothing on buildings to show that they are synagogues. Many of the synagogues were built by individuals or families for their friends and family. Some of these privately owned synagogues have been renovated by families living abroad, e.g. Canada. In some of those that continue to hold services, the dvar Torah can be given in Hebrew, French or Arabic. The majority of chupas take place in Temple Algeria (now called Temple Beth El, which was built in the 19th century and was restored in 1990. One has to be a member to attend this synagogue. During our visit to this synagogue we were shown the stained glass windows depicting the 12 tribes, which are an imitation of Chagall's windows. This synagogue has approximately 30 people attending the Friday night service and between 80 and 100 members on Shabbat morning. Temple Beth El has a rabbi and a chazzan, who also acts as mohel and shochet.

In 2003 various buildings were bombed on a Friday night by Al Qaeda, including the Jewish Alliance club – which was empty at the time - however, a policeman and a guard died. The King came to apologise to the Jewish community on the Sunday following the attack, and 1M Moroccans staged a march to say "don't touch Jewish buildings and the Jewish community". It should be noted that the King then decreed that all Jewish buildings, when they are in use, should be protected and have armed guards by way of security for which he or the government would be financially responsible.

To finish our visit to this area, we visited the Jewish baker which was selling lots of cakes – appropriate as it was Purim.

During our visit, we looked at the newspaper stand where we could see that even the national newspaper shows the Hebrew date (although to be honest it is not necessarily correct!).

This Jewish museum in Casablanca is the only Jewish museum in the Arab countries. It was opened 7 years' ago by Simon Levy and many of the artefacts were provided by Rafi Elmaleh, our Jewish guide in Morocco. The museum exhibits include Moroccan clothes and artefacts and religious items from closed, dilapidated and destroyed Moroccan synagogues.

Initially the Moroccan Government was not enthusiastic about having a Jewish Museum, as it is a Muslim country. However, Mr Azulay a Jewish Government adviser helped to persuade the King and other officials that its existence would be a good idea, especially for tourism.

One synagogue which had been set up by a Mr Toledano had been turned into a boxing ring but after negotiation the synagogue has been restored by the family through the good work undertaken by Rafi.

Amongst the items displayed are an amazing collection of photographs of old synagogues, and a sefer Torah from the south of Morocco used by the Bedouin Jews.

In the museum, a plethora of information is provided regarding Moroccan Jews and their history including the fact that King Mohammed V saved Jews during the Second World War.

The Museum has lots of visitors from tourists, but also from Moroccan schools and universities. However, Muslim parents must first give their permission for their children to visit.

Marilyn





Friday 22 March

On Friday we found ourselves on the bus “from Casablanca going South” in the words of the old Crosby Stills and Nash song. Our journey took us along a new expressway opened in the last few years so a smooth and pleasant ride, through the Low Atlas Mountains and our first view of Berber villages, to the second imperial city of Marrakesh, now probably Morocco’s main tourist centre.

Rafi pointed out various attractions as we drove through – La Mamounia Hotel where Churchill once stayed, the Yves St Laurent Museum and adjoining Majorelle Gardens and the millions of date palm trees. We visited the souk in the mellah, which is still owned by the Jewish community and has recently been restored, and stopped at the nearby home of Moshe and Titi, who would be our hosts for our Friday night meal, to present flowers as a gift before Shabbat came in.

We attended the service in the mellah’s synagogue before crowding into Moshe and Titi’s home for a wonderful meal, including a magnificent birthday cake for two of our group who would be celebrating that weekend.

Janet







Sunday 24 March

Visiting the Berber village in the Atlas Mountains where Rafi was based for 4 months researching his book was a real pleasure. We met the lovely family he had befriended there – grandmother, sons and grand-daughter. We ate the delicious bread we had watched being baked in a traditional oven, along with home-made butter and honey. We then learned how to make the traditional Moroccan mint tea. We felt very privileged to be in the company of this delightful family in their mountain home.

To return to my theme of tolerance from the first day, what we saw in the High Atlas Berber villages between the “settled” (non-Sephardic) Jews and the non-Jewish tribes was also evident in our Jewish Renaissance group this week. We were all friendly, happy to share and respectful of each other’s views and beliefs. Thank you JR for a truly inspiring trip.

Janet







www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk/tours