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The Jews of Fez, 1985.

THE JEWS OF FEZ
Daniel Jeremy Silver
March 10, 1985

Morocco has become Europe's Florida where northerners escape the winter, and the picturesque city of Fez has become a popular tourist attraction. Fez is situated on the slopes of a high valley whose shores reach up into the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. Around 1911, when the French took over the governance of Morocco, they had the good sense to build a new city a few leagues to the west of the original town which was left undisturbed. The old city has been cleaned up. Centuries of litter have been cleaned from the streets and the fetid stench of a north African city has largely disappeared, revealing the beauty of Fez's medieval architecture. Fez today is a city where a visitor can enjoy the beauties of the past without having to endure the sights of the unspeakable poverty which was also part of that past.

Fez was founded in the year 809 by a man named Idris who claimed descent from Mohammed and was able to establish his authority over much of what the Arabs call the mashred, the West. Jews settled in Idris' capital at its founding. They were needed. Arab culture looked down on the artisan: the goldsmith, the leather or metal worker - working with one's hands was the mark of low status. Yet, city life requires crafts people and these services were provided by the area's base population, the Berbers and Jews. Jews had lived in the area of Fez for perhaps a thousand years. While working in the nearby Roman city of Valublis a few years ago, archeologists found an old Roman graveyard which contained a Hebrew-inscribed headstone from the third or second century of this era which indicated that this was the burial site of Matrona, the daughter of Rabbi Judah Nach, may she rest in peace. They also found, from a somewhat earlier period, a number of small clay lamps incised with the seven-branched Menorah.

Actually, historians had already suggested that Jews had settled in North Africa some centuries before the Roman conquest. The indigenous population are Berbers who apparently represent a European people which moved south across the Straits of Gibraltar in pre-history and spread across all of what is today Tunisia and Morocco. Then, beginning in the second millenium B.C.E., peoples from the Phoenician cities of Sidon and Tyre began to establish trading posts along the Mediterranean coast: in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Their economic and political influence spread inland until, in the first millenium, North Africa became an independent Phoenician empire.

When we studied Latin in high school, we learned about the Punic wars fought between the Romans and the Carthageneans. The word Punic is an Anglicized version of the Latin term which the Romans used to designate Phoenicians. Punic wars are simply Phoenician Wars. Carthage was ruled by Phoenician. The foundress of Carthage is said to have been the Phoenician princess, Dido, who is claimed by some to be the sister of the infamous Jezebel who married Ahab, the King of Israel, and gave Elijah so many problems. The Phoenician-Carthaginian Empire contested for some centuries with Rome for the domination of the western Mediterranean. Remember Hannabel crossing the Alps with his elephants to attack the city of Rome. Finally, in 148 B.C.E., the Roman legions conquered Carthage, leveled it to the ground and sowed it with salt so that it would never again be habitable.

Rome followed the Phoenicians as rulers of North Africa but did not eradicate the Phoenician cultural imprint, particularly a semitic tongue which had many similarities with Hebrew. It is most unlikely that Jews, Judeans and Israelites came along with these Phoenician traders and colonialists and that Jewish settlements existed in North Africa during the first millenium. But, in any case, these small communities remained throughout the Roman period and Jews seem to have had some success in converting to Judaism the Berber tribes,

particularly those who lived in the high reaches of the Atlas Mountains. When the Arab armies began that great, all-conquering sweep in the late seventh and eighth century which would carry them across Libya and into North Africa, they were opposed at the gates of Morocco by a confederation of Berber tribespeople led by a Jewish queen named Kahina whose armies were able to fend off the Muslim invaders for about five years during which she and her Judaized tribespeople effectively controlled the entire North African area.

The Arabs established Fez as a cultural and economic capital, and Jews proved useful to the powers that be. Most Jews were shopkeepers and artisans. The North African community has always been one where a majority of the Jews not only existed on sufferance but were poor. During the glory days of the early Islamic spread, Fez became the Oxford of the Arab world in North Africa. Important madrasas were established here and the Jews responded to this cultural stimulation. Some of the most important schools of the Sephardim were established in Fez. Like the Madrasas, these yeshivot specialized in grammar and lexicography. In the ninth century Judah ibn-Koraish, and in the tenth century ibn-Dunash, established the scientific basis of Hebrew grammar and so enabled others to translate scientifically and analytically the Torah and the other classic texts. Perhaps the greatest of the Jewish rabbinic figures was Isaac b. Joseph Alfasi of Fez. Alfasi was born in the early twelfth century and died nearly a century later. Alfasi, trained in the schools of Fez, went on to Lucena in Spain where he became the most renowned Talmudic scholar of his day. His great law code remains a monument of rabbinic scholarship and is studied to this day. His influence spread far and wide; he was a teacher of Judah Ha Levi and the father of Maimonides.

But the glory days of Fez as far as the Jewish community were concerned were not destined to last. Just about the time of Al Fasi's birth, a group of Berber tribesmen, newly converted to Islam, conquered Morocco and swept across

the straits into Spain. They were called the Almohades, those who affirm the unity of God, because of their religious zeal. Fanatic converts, they gave to non-Muslims no choice but conversion or death. The Christian communities were absolutely destroyed by the initial Almohade attacks. The somewhat larger Jewish communities either went into exile or accepted conversion or stood their ground and faced the fury of the mobs. As is usually the case, a few years after their initial victories Almohado's zeal began to be tempered and many Jews were allowed to revert to their original faith. But this tragedy had introduced something new into the life of the Jews of North Africa. They were now the only remaining identifiable minority in a Muslim ocean. One of the truths of minority survival is that you are much better off if you are one of a number of minorities than if you are the only minority. One of the reasons that minorities have done so well in the United States is that know-nothing and populist groups have so many enemies - Catholics, blacks, Jews, American Indians, Vietnamese - that they have a hard time concentrating their hate on any one target. Jews suffered cruelly in Europe because they were the only non-Christians. Now in Morocco they were the only non-Muslim minority, a situation which, fortunately, was not duplicated in other Muslim areas. The Jews in the east were always one among a number of minorities: Parsee, Kurd, Armenian, Coptic Christian. There were always other groups, but in North Africa the Jews were the only target, and as North Africa fell from prosperity into poverty the caravan route which had brought prosperity to North Africa was superseded by ocean going trade and North Africa lost its pre-eminence. Someone needed to take the blame and the Jews became the readily available scapegoat, a scorned, spat-upon, abused minority who suffered all of the disabilities which usually befall those declared pariahs.

In the fifteenth century a mellah was established in Fez. There had always been a Jewish quarter. There were Jewish quarters in most cities of the

Arab world - people who share certain identities preferred to live together - but the mellah came into being as a ghetto. The mellah was no longer a quarter where most Jews happened to live but a walled-in place with a gate where Jews had to live and where Muslims controlled when that gate was opened and locked. After the fifteenth century the Jews of Fez were not allowed to leave the mellah while wearing shoes. Outside the mellah they had to go barefoot or to wear straw sandals. Inside the mellah they could dress as they wished. Outside the mellah they had to wear black clothes. In the Arab world black indicates a person who is without protection. Widows wear black. Jews had to wear black, a color which signaled their haplessness and their lack of legal protection. Black says to the young toughs: here is a ready target.

In Fez, as in most Arab cities, rulers discovered that the helpless could be useful to them. Their very dependency made them useful. Because the Jews were not accepted by the population at large, they were not a threat to the Emir's power and he could confidently use them for sensitive missions or for tasks which others would not undertake. They could be used to collect taxes; to condemn property; to collect debts. If a Jew became wealthy their wealth could easily be taken. All the Emir had to do was to send the janissaries into the mellah - no Jew could bear arms - and take what you wanted. The Jews of Fez became the Emir's servants and the king, for his own purposes, could protect the Jews from the wrath of the mob so that they could continue to do his dirty work and be fleeced whenever he needed to fleece them.

Over the centuries the Jews of Fez endured every fifty years or so what we would call today a pogrom, a bloodletting. The mob would break into the mellah. The king would let them get rid of their anger for a day or so, and then, when the mob was satiated, he would send out the troops to protect the survivors so that they could continue to do his dirty work. Life was precarious. Jews were literate. The Muslim Berber mass was not, but Jews had no rights and Muslims, however ignorant, did. Jews inevitably picked up

most of the superstitions of the Berber Muslim masses.

In the late fifteenth century the number of Jews in Fez increased substantially. One wouldn't think Jews would be attracted to the kind of life that I have described, but it's all a matter of perspective. In March of 1492, just before Columbus sailed for America, Ferdinand and Isabella, under church pressure, published an edict which gave the 600,000 Jews of Spain three choices: to leave, to convert, or to be executed. They had ninety days to make up their minds. There was no place in Europe to which these Jews could go except to Portugal, and in 1498 Portugal's king issued a similar draconian order. The closest Muslim land Spain's Jews could reach was North Africa, and the richest city in North Africa was Fez. Many made for Fez though they were attacked and fleeced. Some twenty thousand, a great number for that day, found their way to Fez.

Arriving in Fez, they discovered that the native Jews did not welcome them with eager arms. They were feared. The Jews of Spain had a higher culture than the locals and were used to a better life. They were used to authority. They treated their women better. They had been members of a middle class and most of the Jews of Fez were lower classes. They would crowd the mellah and compete. The Jews of the Fez mellah locked their gates against these magurashim, as they were called, those who had been expelled, and forced them to live for awhile in what we would call a temporary displaced person camp on the plain outside of the city. The ruler of Fez saw that it was to his advantage to bring these magurashim into his mellah. There were talented physicians among them who could cure his illnesses. There were merchants, familiar with the intricacies of international trade. He saw this immigration as a source of potential wealth and he forced the mellah to open its gates. This drama between those who were called the toshavim, the older settlers, and the m'gurashim, the new Sephardic elite, was duplicated in all the cities of North Africa. This same scenario is not unlike what took place here when the older German-Jewish

immigrant group was suddenly faced with the in-migration of the culturally distinct Jews of eastern Europe. There was, however, this difference. In America the central European group felt itself part of a "higher" cultural host community while in North Africa it was the late arriving Sephardim of Spain who felt themselves to be the higher culture group. Indeed, since the fifteenth century, the Sephardim have, by and large, been the elite group of the various communities of North Africa. The toshavim became Fez's proletariat; the impoverished and culturally deprived mass whose hard lives were little redeemed by those values which we would like to associate with Jews.

The Sephardim brought with them a heightened interest in mysticism - Kabbalah. On one level mysticism is a very high and sophisticated kind of theosophy and cosmology. On this level it was both intellectually sophisticated and a usable rationale for Jewish significance despite their political impotence. The basic myth behind this Kabbalah is that at Creation something went wrong and part of God's Glory, God's power, escaped and was imprisoned by matter. Redemption will take place only when God has regained the fullness of His power and this will occur only when all the sparks of God's glory are freed from the hard shells in which they had been encased. How will this occur? Properly directed Jewish prayer is the only way to break open these shells. Jewish prayer, particularly that of those who were expert, done with intent, Kavvuansh, is the prerequisite of salvation not only for the Jewish community but for the world. Far from being an insignificant minority, Jews held in their hands the key to salvation.

There is another level on which kaballah is simply magic, superstition. This level preoccupied the interest of the Jews of Fez. Their lives were surrounded by evil spirits, jinns, and they needed to know all kinds of incantations against the plague or economic disaster. They needed protection for their women during childbirth and for the children when they left the mellah. The

writing of Lameot, magical lockets, became a major religious activity and the reading of the Zohar, the sacred book of the Kabbalah, became, really, a regular act of devotion second only to the reading of the Bible. You would have found in Fez as recently as twenty years ago small havurot groups who read the Zohar from beginning to end without ever breaking the reading. The reading would go on day and night, hour after hour, one reader supplanting the other. They did not necessarily know what they were reading, but the reading itself was a shield for them and their community. Almost every act by a Jew who lived in Fez was preceded by the saying of protective formula or by seeking the advice of holy men or women on how to protect from the evil eye a child, a woman, a marriage, a bar mitzvah.

The life of most women in Fez was hell itself. The traditional rights of women are narrowly limited by rabbinic Judaism. The woman is not to participate in community councils. Her testimony is not to be taken in a trial. Her life is to be separate; respected but unequal. Under the influence of Berber North African and Muslim life that traditional inequality was exaggerated. In medieval Europe the polygamy permitted in Talmudic law was rendered an ordinance passed to promulgate a certain Rabbi Gershon in the eleventh century which prohibited polygamy among Ashkenazic Jews. Spanish Jewry was deeply influenced by their monogamous neighbors to the north and their rabbis had imposed an effective, if not enforced, monogamy on the Sephardim by writing clauses into the marriage contracts which made it economically ruinous for men to divorce their wives. These new legal restrictions were not common in the ketuvot of the Jews of North Africa. Polygamy was not common in Fez, but successive polygamy was.

A man would marry a woman, really a girl since most early marriages were with girls of nine, ten or eleven - the younger the better. He would then

tire of her, divorce her and marry another. This process would be repeated any number of times. A scholar who is now vice-mayor of Jerusalem and a well-known historian of North African Jewry, himself a North African Jew, a man named Andre Shoraki, writes in Between East and West of meeting in one of the mellahs a woman who had been divorced eighteen times. The rate of divorce among the Jews of Fez was certainly considerably higher than the scandalous rate of divorce among American Jews. A woman had no recourse but to submit. Once she was divorced, and by Jewish law you can divorce your wife without specific cause, she had no way of earning a living and nothing to fall back on. Absolute and abject poverty was the role for most of the Jews. She had no alternative but to remarry and she was utterly dependent upon the good will of the man whom she married. If he tired of her or if she didn't produce a son, she was summarily divorced. She had no recourse but to remarry as often as she could until her looks deserted her and then, more likely than not, she took to the streets. It was sad, cruel world, a world of Jewish criminals and prostitutes. The sense of family which we assume so basic to Jewish life was, to a large degree, bleached out of Jewish life. If you ever want to see the results of cultural deprivation, study the sociology of Moroccan Jewish life over the last two or three hundred years.

Not surprisingly, in the nineteenth century, as Europe became more and more visible in North Africa, those Jews were attracted to everything that Europe had to offer. There was obviously nothing in Fez's culture that could command their loyalty; so they were among the first to learn French. France was the country that exerted the great cultural influence in that part of the world. If they were fortunate enough to be able to do so, they sent their sons to France to school. Jews were the first Moroccans to become the local agents of French trading houses. This was their way up and out from the ignorance, poverty and disease of North African medievalism.

Morocco was the last of the countries of North Africa to come under direct European domination. It was not until 1911 that the French gained control over the area around Fez. Fez's Jews then enjoyed a brief period of growing prosperity. The Alliance Israelite Universale, the French version of our Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds provided funds for schools and clinics. There seemed to be hope for the quarter of a million Jews of Morocco and for the 20,000 Jews of Fez.

That hope was soon aborted by the rise of Arab nationalism. Because of his thirst for escape from dhimmi status and social ostracism, the Jew had thrown in his lot with the colonial overlord. Nationalism and chauvinism rose to oppose colonialism and the agents of France were the first to get it in the neck. The Jew came to be seen by the nationalists as an agent of the colonial enemy rather than as a two thousand-year old neighbor.

Nationalism brought in its train a passion for national unity around common roots. Fundamentalist Islam began to reassert itself. Threatened by modernity, old fanaticisms were revived. The Jew was increasingly made to feel unwanted. Although the Jews of this area were more deeply integrated in the life of the average Moroccan community than in other parts of the Arab world, and though the political issues raised by the creation of the State of Israel were far off; once the second World War was over the leadership of the Moroccan communities recognized that their days were numbered and a major exodus from Morocco began. Today the city of Fez which once was home to about twenty thousand Jews may have two hundred. Morocco which once had a quarter of a million Jews has today less than fifteen to eighteen thousand Jews, largely centered in Casablanca and Rabat. Many went to Israel. The upper-class went to France, England or the United States. A great Jewish community was decimated.

Interestingly, the first Jew ever elected to the United States Senate, a senator from Georgia by the name of Ulle, was a Jew of Moroccan ancestry, the

son of one of the favored Sephardic families who had managed to survive in that difficult world. The richer Jews went west; the poorer, less educated Jews went to Israel. Many who went to Israel came from small mountain villages where they had received the least rudimentary education. Their synagogue was a mud hut. Schooling probably never went beyond the a, b, c's. These Moroccans had learned, out of necessity, the law of survival in the jungle, fight back and then ask questions. They brought this street wisdom to Israel. Early on the phrase, Morroca sakim, became popular: when you find a Moroccan you will find a knife.

After the second World War many Jews in the west began to ask: What would have happened if Jews had been more militant in self defense? Over the last three to four hundred years the Jews of Morocco were used to carrying and using knives and protecting their turf; and as is true in the black and Hispanic ghettos of our country, most of that bloodletting ended up being against their own and much of it was unsuccessful as a defense.

Fez's Jews were conditioned to respond as a feared animal to attack. They were conditioned to be devious, to be overly shrewd, to suspect government. If they spoke the truth, this truth would be used against them and so lying became a way of life because it was the only way to survive. Israel has had a difficult time training these Jews to live in an open society where the government is not the enemy and where truth-speaking and truth in one's business relationships is a requirement, where citizens can trust the police to enforce the law and one doesn't have to be a vigilante to protect home or turf. It's one of the unsung success stories of Israel social work and government policy that the acculturation of the Moroccan Jew has gone as far as it has.

Of all the old Jewries which have been decimated in recent years, the only one that we can be grateful to have disappeared is that of Morocco. These Jews were surrounded by uneducated and inhospitable neighbors, treated as pariahs,

without full rights, and it is unlikely that this Jewry would have gained the skills and right attitudes necessary in the twentieth century.

Why have these few Jews remained in Fez?

Those who have remained are, by and large, the few who are better off and who have special commercial interests or the very poor and aged who are afraid to leave or the ultra orthodox who believe that Israel was established by a secular power and will not be secure until the messiah comes and does his work.

Fez's history is that of a community which, despite Torah and our tradition, all values, had over time, to a large degree been brutalized, criminalized and reduced to beggary and superstition. Jews are not immune to deteriorating social pressures when these are constant enough and conditions are unfortunate enough for a long enough period. It's a sad story but one that needs to be told.

WRHS

Kaddish

Friday

Sunday March 10, 1985

Those who passed away this week

ADRIENNE RATNER
CAMILA ALCABES
MARTHA R. BAILYS

Yahrzeits

JEROME H. SQUIRES
SAM ROGOFF
FRANK I. KLEIN
ARTHUR FRIEDMAN
SAM RINGLE
ROSA E. WEINGARDEN
HILDA K. REICH
DR. WILLIAM B. LEVENSON
ADELE JOSEPH YELSON
PHILIP SAGINOR
DR. JOSEPH SCHWARTZBERG
JOSEPH H. GROSS
DELLA BEDOL
JUDITH MEYERS
ESTELLE K. SCHAFFER
DOROTHY LEVITT
MINNA G. KERN
JUDY HOLLANDER BESS
FAY L. OKUM

SADIE EIGEN

ADON OLAM

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
<p>MARCH SERVICE 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak on THE JEWS OF BAGHDAD Third in a series on cities where Jews lived for over 1000 years PURIM CELEBRATION 12 Noon - Branch High School 10:00 a.m.</p> <p>3</p>	<p>TMC Lecture Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver Confronting a Fallible Tradition 8:15 p.m. - Branch</p> <p>4</p>	<p>Adult Hebrew 7:45 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>TWA Special Tuesday 10:00 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi David Sandmel 10:30 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>TYA Board Meeting 8:00 p.m. - Branch</p> <p>5</p>	<p>6</p>	<p>7</p> <p><i>Fed -</i></p>	<p>8</p> <p><i>Super Sunday</i></p> <p><i>Service - 5:30 p.m.</i> <i>Service - 5:30 p.m.</i> The Temple Chapel</p>	<p>Shabbat Service 9:00 a.m.</p> <p>9</p>
<p>SERVICE 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak on THE JEWS OF FEZ Fourth in a series on cities where Jews lived for over 1000 years High School 10:00 a.m.</p> <p>10</p>	<p>TMC Lecture Dr. Martin Plax Does Israel Command My Support? 8:15 p.m. - Branch</p> <p>11</p>	<p>Adult Hebrew 7:45 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>TWA Activities 10:00 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi David Sandmel 10:30 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>Lunch With The Rabbi Downtown 12 noon - 1:30 p.m.</p> <p>Temple Board Meeting 8:00 p.m. - Branch</p> <p>12</p>	<p>13</p> <p><i>Jenny - Klor</i></p>	<p>14</p>	<p>15</p> <p>Service - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel</p> <p>THIRD FRIDAY 7:45 p.m. - Branch</p>	<p>Shabbat Service 9:00 a.m.</p> <p>16</p>
<p>SERVICE 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak High School 10:00 a.m.</p> <p>17</p>	<p>TMC Lecture Rabbi Susan E. Berman Can a Modern Jew Believe in God? 8:15 p.m. - Branch</p> <p>18</p> <p><i>GAMBLING & GOVERNMENT</i></p>	<p>Adult Hebrew 7:45 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>TWA Activities 10:00 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi David Sandmel 10:30 a.m.</p> <p>19</p>	<p>20</p> <p>TMC Board Meeting 8:00 p.m. - Branch</p>	<p>21</p>	<p>22</p> <p>Service - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel</p>	<p>No School</p> <p>23</p>
<p>SERVICE 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak No School</p> <p>24</p>	<p>TMC Lecture Rabbi David Sandmel Can A Modern Jew Pray? 8:15 p.m. - Branch</p> <p>25</p>	<p>Adult Hebrew 7:45 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>TWA Activities 10:00 a.m. - Branch</p> <p>Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi David Sandmel 10:30 a.m.</p> <p>26</p>	<p>27</p> <p>NO MIDWEEK CLASSES</p>	<p>28</p> <p>Temple Seniors 11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. Branch</p>	<p>29</p> <p>Service - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel</p>	<p>No School</p> <p>30</p>



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Rabbi Silver will lead the service
Saturday, April 6th at 6:30 p.m.

The Temple Branch

SECOND SEDER



THE TEMPLE BULLETIN
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SUNDAY MORNING SERVICES

March 3, 1985

10:30 a.m.

The Temple Branch

Rabbi

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

will speak on

"THE JEWS OF BAGHDAD"

Third in a series on cities where
Jews lived for over 1000 years

Children from our Religious
School will join us for a
Purim Song Fest.

March 10, 1985

10:30 a.m.

The Temple Branch

Rabbi

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

will speak on

"THE JEWS OF FEZ"

Fourth in a series on cities where
Jews lived for over 1000 years

Friday Evening Service - 5:30 - 6:10 - The Temple Chapel
Sabbath Service - 9:00 a.m. - The Temple Branch

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