Jewish Stories From the Maghreb:

French Literature of North African Jewry

Craig Lewis
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Referee, Professor Susan Einbinder, PhD

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Digest

Beginning in 1830, as the French sphere of influence spread into the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco), Jews in France took notice of the plight of their co-religionists in North Africa. Under the Pact of Omar in the Islamic countries, Jews were treated as *dhimmi*, protected "people of the book" (a designation which in fact made them second-class citizens). Patriotic French Jews hoped to make Maghrebi Jews, whose practices were they viewed as archaic, more like them. To assist the overall "civilizing mission" of the French government, a group of Parisian Jews, in 1860, established the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. Their stated purpose was to provide education and assistance to Jews in Islamic lands.

The primary goal for students of *Alliance* schools was: "Speak French." French language and culture gradually took precedence over regional concerns and unseated religious education as a foundational part of Jewish life. As Jews became proficient in French language, groups of authors began to emerge, writing in French and inspired by the French classics.

With their borrowed language and styles, they wrote what was most familiar. Their writing reflected social changes, rapidly changing role of religious life, the emergence of women's voices, and the disappearance of their way life. In much of their work, there are remembrances of Jewish life in *haras* and *mellahs* (ghettos). The authors and the writings, discussed in this thesis, represent a period of time, the interwar period, in which North African Jewish writers were coming into their own in their language and storytelling skills. Their stories help us to witness a slice of life, a moment in time, when

Jewish existence in the Maghreb was undergoing massive changes. Reading and understanding these stories help us to understand a piece of Jewish history which helps us to gain perspective on overall Jewish history.

Dedication

Elle est à toi cette chanson,
Toi l'Auvergnat qui, sans façon,
M'as donné quatre bouts de bois
Quand dans ma vie il faisait froid.

...

Ce n'était rien qu'un feu de bois,
Mais il m'avait chauffé le corps.
Et dans mon âme il brûle encore
A la manière d'un feu de joie.

Georges Brassens

For Gilbert and the Slama family of Chamalières, France,

Your hospitality taught me the value of *k'lal yisrael* and gave me my first taste of Judeo-Maghrebi culture.

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Especially Lee, Margolit, Yisraela, Noni, and Dan. Thank you for taking an interest in my work. Where would the books be without you?

For my wife Jennifer,

The words "thank you" and "I love you" are not enough.

You make me live.
You sustain me.
Without you, I would have never reached this point.
Amen.

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Introduction

In 1964, the best known Jewish author to have come from North Africa, Albert Memmi, raised the following question in an article he wrote for the magazine *L'Arche*:

"Can there be a 'Jewish' literature?"[1]

His issue with the notion of there being a Jewish literature stemmed from the fact that he, himself, did not follow any Jewish literary models in the formation of his style. The authors whom he read and studied were Montaigne, Rousseau, and Stendahl. Even from authors of Jewish descent, like Montaigne who had one Jewish parent, or Franz Kafka, Memmi found nothing that commented specifically on their Jewishness; they even took pains in their writing and public lives to hide their Jewishness. He therefore rejected that coming from the pen of a Jewish writer made literature Jewish.

Memmi also rejected that simply writing about Jewish topics could qualify writing as true Jewish literature. He claimed that he, himself, only ever truly aspired to write in French and to tell stories of North Africa. Judaism became an essential component of his writing as an extension of his life experiences. He intended simply to be a writer, but by virtue of his birth and his subject matter, he fell into the category of "Jewish." This exposed him, and other authors with similar backgrounds to a particular level of scrutiny which inhibited what could be written and published because of what potential audiences deemed acceptable.

The audience, whether intended or *de facto* was also a concern for Memmi. He believed that Jewish writers were too apprehensive about reactions from within their own communities to write with the necessary honesty and candor to pen legitimate literary creations. Jewish audiences were highly critical readers, sensitive to the slightest critique

[1] Memmi, Albert. *"Peut-il y avoir une literature juive?"* L'Arche, No. 88, May, 1964.

of tradition and to incorrect representations of Jewish customs. "Professional Jews" as he called them (presumably rabbis and communal leaders) were quick to dismiss an author's legitimacy if when they detected a factual error regarding Jewish life. (Memmi gave an example of a character who shockingly lays *tefillin*[2] on the Sabbath). Ninety percent of Jews, he claimed, were ignorant of the exacting requirements of Jewish practice, and the error was more true to the state of the Jewish people whose practices were changing rapidly as Jews in the 20th century were concurrently pulled in multiple directions: away from religious dogma, yet a yearning for faith in something; away from yet tradition, yet toward nostalgia for communal unity. Misstatements of practice likely would have reflected the real condition of the Jews, rather than the idealized state promoted by dogmatic belief. However, the aversion to making incorrect statements kept this type of honesty out of "Jewish" literature. "Precise knowledge," wrote Memmi, "though desirable in other *milieus*, has a place of [only] relative importance in a work of art."

Life is not experienced in the blacks and whites of written dogmas, but in the shades of grey in between. The art of literature needed to be free to reflect those shades. Some of the North African Jewish writers found that freedom in appealing to non-Jewish or non-Maghrebi audiences. Parisian publishing houses took on many of the Judeo-Maghrebi writers, distributing their works in France as signs of the successful spread of French language and culture. Liberated from their own native audiences, they encountered different artistic restrictions. They were forced to embellish their tales appealing to the Western taste for exotic tales of the Orient. Whether Jewish or non-Jewish, Maghrebi or French, the audiences helped to call into question whether *littérature Judéo-Maghrébine d'expression française* is literature in its truest sense.

[2] Phylacteries worn on weekday mornings during worship—never on the Sabbath.

In light of Memmi's essay, as I present the following thesis, I am forced to confront the question: "Can there be a Jewish literature?" Was the religious heritage of the authors significant in their writing? Was Judaism present in the themes of this writing? Was Judaism accurately (or too accurately) portrayed? Were authors inhibited by audiences from genuinely expressing their art?

The answers to these questions, like the lives they reflect, are not as black and white as the closed-ended nature of the questions would make them seem. The answers, too, are shaded between "yes" and "no." How are we to understand the vilification of tradition in the stories of Blanche Bendahan? Or how accurately do the idealized, colorful settings described by Elissa Rhaïs, while telling tragic stories, say about her attitudes toward her home? What do we make of the exaggerated heroics of Western education and culture in Vitalis Danon? How much did Tunisian Jews share Ryvel's nostalgia for life in the ghettos? What does it mean for Jewish authors like César Benattar to be recording and transcribing folklore like the tales of the Djoha-- tales which several cultures claim as their own?

In the following chapters, I will be exploring many of these questions, looking at the works of Judeo-Maghrebi writers as products of a particular place and time, influenced by political, social, and religious influences. My observations are based largely on historical writings of André Chouraqui and trends found in Judeo-Maghrebi literature. I have tried to describe the general trends which resulted from the influence of French language education on the Jews of North Africa. There are certainly numerous exceptions. To keep the scope of this study manageable, my effort has been to describe the overall changes on the macro level, referring to specific examples when appropriate.

In building my arguments, I present relevant passages from the various publications and historical accounts. The source material for most citations is French but all passages included in this thesis are printed in English. To my knowledge, these stories do not appear elsewhere in English translation, so, for the purpose of being accessible to non-French speakers, I have attempted to render faithful translations of all citations.

The primary works discussed in this thesis were published in the inter-war period, after North African Jews had achieved a sufficient level of French to produce literature in that language and before the focus of Jewish world literature turned to responses to the atrocities of World War II. All of the authors are Jewish, and regardless of subjects, embellishments, or audience, by virtue of writing in French, they represent a reaction to a set of shared historical experiences. Those experiences had a profound impact on the Jewish communities of North Africa—an impact that will be examined in light of cultural responses gleaned from Jewish authors in the Maghreb.

Chapter 1:

Historical Background of

Littérature Judéo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française

Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer, has aptly described colonial literature by citing an African proverb:

> "Until the lions produce their own historians, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter."[3]

Though he writes from his own experiences with the British presence in his native country, his observations apply to the more general phenomenon of colonization. Achebe admits that the lion in his metaphor is excessively strong. The lion is too powerful to be an accurate portrayal of a colonized people, and I would suggest that the image of the colonizer as armed hunter whose only goal is to dominate and kill may also be hyperbole. Indeed colonies and protectorates were generally established through intimidation and brute force of military power, but following the establishment of a colony, the colonizing force typically exercised what it believed to be its social responsibilities—education and acculturation of the indigenous population. In doing so, colonizers served their own interests, strengthening their presence in conquered lands, and they also believed, in the process, that they bettered the lives of their new subjects. The education they brought—the culture and the attitudes of the West—were intended to improve the lives of the "poor natives" to whom they were bringing their expression of a "universal civilization." The history and perceptions of the world, even the perceptions of the conquered land that were taught to the indigenous people in their own land, were taught exclusively from the point of view of the colonizer. In this way they attempted to educate the population in

[3] Achebe, Chinua. Home and Exile, New York: Oxford Univveristy Press, 2000. 73.

their own image, thereby reinforcing their presence in that land and perpetuating their social and economic controls in the colony. So perhaps the more appropriate image would be the lion tamer rather than the hunter. The tamer intimidates the beast with power and then trains it to respond in the way he wants. Similarly, a conqueror overpowers a weaker foe and then trains them in its ways until the power relationship ultimately is accepted. Then when the conquered become historians, they too, having been conditioned by the hunter, will tell the glory of the hunter.

Achebe is bothered by the concept of colonization and the artificial spread of a "universal civilization" shaped by Western powers. The arrogance in assuming that their ways were the better ways was the hubris of the colonizing powers and ultimately led to the fall of many an empire as their controls were rejected by the natives of the land. However along the way, there were many astounding successes by exporters of culture in shaping civilizations in their own images. Though countries and the majority of native populations themselves may not have welcomed the external influences, there have been pockets of minority populations, often subjugated peoples, living among those nations who welcomed the intervention. This intervention signaled to them an opportunity to advance their place in their society and improve their lives. The story of the Jewish population of North Africa in the late 19th and 20th century amid the advance of the French colonial expansion is a prime example of this lion willing to be tamed. Here, maybe the fox in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince provides a more accurate description. The fox looks to the prince and says, "*apprivoise-moi*"—"tame me." The emancipation and Enlightenement ideals-- *liberté, égalité, fraternité*– brought to North Africa by the French opened for Maghrebi Jews avenues of prosperity and success

previously closed to them. Then the literature they produced as a result helped to preserve their own culture, but by writing in the language of the colonizer, and often imitating the colonizer's literary styles, they took part in the spread of the "universal civilization." The French literature written by Jews of the Maghreb, as will become evident in later sections of this thesis, reflected their own culture and people through the eyes of the French, reflecting French perceptions of their culture onto themselves.

Judeo-Maghrebi literature written in the French language was the product of a long process of colonization and acculturation that led to the production of a literature written in the second language of an indigenous population. For the writers who created this specific segment of literature, French was the language of academics, culture, and possibly politics. Judeo-Arabic was the language of the home, and Hebrew was the language of the synagogue. French, though it was not the official language had become the ticket to success, and those Maghrebi Jews who mastered it were able to climb the social ladder in a way they never had before in centuries of living in North Africa. That members of the Jewish population in North African countries could achieve a level of French sufficient for the creation of literature is a testament to the devotion of those who sought to bring Western education to the Jews of the Orient as well as the Jews' drive to attain the type of lifestyle promised to them if they acculturated to the ways of the colonial power. Of course there is a question of what makes the Jewish production of literature in the French language particularly unique in this region? After all, entire countries were affected and influenced by the infiltration of European culture. What set the Jews apart from other ethnic groups was the focused support of co-religionists, wealthy Jews in emancipated France whose benevolence led them to take great interest in

improving the quality of life for their fellow Jews in the outer reaches of the French empire. This led to the creation in 1860 of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (Universal Israelite Alliance), often referred to as the *A.I.U.* or more simply as just the *Alliance*. Almost all of the key figures in Judeo-Maghrebi literature were touched by this organization in some way, as students, teachers, or communal leaders. The *Alliance* schools, if not the central subject matter of a particular book, are almost always alluded to, if not directly mentioned, as an influential part of the characters' lives. The conditions in which these writers developed did not occur naturally, and most certainly did not happen overnight. They were created methodically and were a response to many historical and cultural phenomena that converged in North Africa in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Though the creation of literature was not the goal of the French colonizing North Africa, certain components of this expansion did create a cultural climate in which it could emerge. Some of the components, secondary to the obvious economic interests, included a commitment to exporting French language and culture. The French literature that resulted from the establishment of a colony and two protectorates in the Maghreb was much more significant than just being stories written in French. It captured a moment in time, telling in many ways the story of the Jews' emancipation in North Africa. In the writing one can sense the feeling of hope among the protected Jewish communities, the richness of Jewish traditions in the region, and the desire to describe those things in a new language so that later French-speaking generations could know about them. This last item, cultural preservation, was one of the key motivators for the Jewish authors of the Maghreb. At the same time the record preserved in the books reflects a great deal of sadness, referring back to the misery of oppression which had not entirely come to an end,

the frustrations brought on by rapid change, the pain of breaks with ancient familial traditions, and the disappointment of being stuck between two worlds. In many ways this literature was a fusion, applying a new language and new literary styles to retell the folklore of the region, and reflecting on the lives that were happening in Arabic, but were being told as part of a French literary tradition. In this respect, Judeo-Maghrebi literature written in French represents much more than successful education. It shows a successful attempt at acculturation and integration of communities.

Of course the Jewish communities of these countries were not the only communities impacted for better or for worse by European influences, but their historical experience prior to colonization and their reaction to it were unique. Also, the Jewish experience in each of the three countries varied as did the local populations' reactions to French expansion. For this reason, it is difficult to describe the overall experience in the Maghreb with broad strokes, but certain generalizations can be made. As a minority group whose religion shared roots with Islam, the Jews along with Christians in the theocratic Muslim states were granted protected status as *dhimmi*, "people of the Book." Part of this supposed "protection" included being confined to ghettos called either *hara* (in Tunisia) or *mellah* (in Morocco)[4]. These Jewish quarters tended to be located near the *kasbah*, where the seat of power was located, as token gesture of the symbolic protection the Muslim leadership offered. Whether the ghetto was meant to keep the Jews in or to protect them from outside dangers is unclear, but what is clear is that, at the time of the French arrival[5], a large majority of North African Jews lived in a *mellah* or a *hara*[6].

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[4] Algeria is an exception. Despite the marginalization of Jews as second-class citizens, living in a ghetto was not part of the Jewish experience.

[5] As upward mobility increased, more and more Jews moved outside of the ghettos.

Therefore one cannot talk about the Jews of North Africa, let alone their literature, without describing the conditions of the Jewish ghettoes.

Based on historical accounts and on the descriptions in the literature, the ghettoes were dark and squalid places where death, by disease or at the hands of their non-Jewish neighbors, was a familiar sight. Living conditions were crowded with houses practically stacked on top of each other. There were no windows in the poorly constructed buildings which, as late as the 19th century, had become leprous. Doors were always open, not as much as a sign of hospitality but to allow light and air to enter. Streets were narrow and winding, with steep inclines and sharp descents, and they might unexpectedly come to dead ends. The structure of the streets themselves added to the poor condition-- with the slightest amount of moisture, they turned to impassible pools of mud. Tucked behind barrier walls and underneath the shadows of their own buildings, the look of a *mellah* was generally dark and dirty, and the histories and literature suggest that there was an overall aura of despair inside these "social prisons" where poverty reigned. The predominant occupation, aside from one's profession, was daily survival. Many of the most destitute *hara* Jews turned to the unseemly practice of begging. One generation into the French protectorate, it was not uncommon for the ageing population who had grown up under French protection to identify their fathers' occupation as a beggar on such and such street corner. In addition to the problem of begging, there arose a wave of the even more unseemly practice of prostitution. As the "world's oldest profession" its existence is not surprising, but along with begging, its extraordinary prevalence in the Jewish communities is an indicator of just how impoverished and desperate their situation in the

[6] Jewish merchants were able to do business in the marketplace by day and would return to their homes at night in the Jewish quarters. In times of distress, the gates could be closed for protection. In some cases, the gates were opened by order of the ruling prince to allow for a pogrom.

ghettoes was. The conditions were so bad that an outside visitor once remarked, "I know why I have seen not even a single dog in the Jewish quarter: When you are a dog, free and independent, you do not live in the *mellah*."[7]

The humiliation suffered by the Jews came from much more than their restricted living space and economic factors. Every aspect of their lowly existence was regulated, including their interactions with their Muslim neighbors. Living under the rules of the Pact of Omar which had been created in the 8th century C.E. to describe the rights and disabilities of Jews and Christians living under Muslim rule, Jews were limited to certain trades, had to wear black clothing, and were at every moment subservient to any Muslim they encountered. Though the Pact of Omar was a significant improvement from the previous state of having no protection at all, it reinforced a Jew's subservience and meant that any excursion beyond the ghetto walls, for commerce or to serve the local government, was fraught with danger. Whenever a Jew had a business dispute with a Muslim or when a Jew failed to abide by stringent social regulations, such as removing their shoes when walking by a mosque, this transgression could be interpreted is impertinence, or worse, blasphemy. A Jew who forgot his place was subject to physical abuse, imprisonment, forced conversion, or even death. The Grand Cadi of Tetuan Abd er-Rahman ben Mohamed el-Barnousi wrote that Jews had no other choice than to accept "humility and disdain."[8] Attacks against individuals were not uncommon, but also frequent were attacks against entire Jewish communities. In an 1811 attack, three Tetuan synagogues were burnt to the ground in one night.

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[7] Chouraqui, André. *Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord.* Paris : Hachette, 1985. 361.
[8] Chouraqui, André. *Cent Ans d'Histoire: L'Alliance Israélite Universelle et la Renaissance Juive Contemporaine (1860-1960).* Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1965. 357.

Having lived for centuries in these conditions, it is understandable that the opportunities represented by the Enlightenment and French culture would be embraced.

"The truth is that these *misérables* aspired to nothing but to escape from it [their lives in the *mellah*]...the Jew toils and sweats daily to pull himself out of darkest, muddy streets, in order to emerge someplace where the sun and the sky do not seem inaccessible, toward the margins where one can dream that one day..."[9]

The one day would come when they learned the French language and the basics of the French way of life.

The way of life the French brought with them revolved around the ideals of the Enlightenment, namely equality of all men with equal opportunities for education as well as access to health services and economic opportunity. A French presence in the Maghreb opened the doors for the involvement of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, a benevolent society created by French Jews for the purpose of improving the lives of Jews in Muslim countries. Their methods included acting as advocates to world governments on behalf of their co-religionists and improving the education of Maghrebi Jews. This education included the importation of Western culture. André Chouraqui has described this second strategy as "*salut par l'Ecole*[10]," liberally translated as "salvation through education." *A.I.U.* representatives believed that Western education would improve the overall quality of life for the Jews, civilizing them, teaching them better hygiene practices, helping them rise above the manual trades passed from generation to generation. For the Jews of the Maghreb, learning to speak French and embracing Western culture were ways of gaining

[9] Chouraqui, André. *Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord*. Paris : Hachette, 1985. 361.
[10] Chouraqui, Andre. *Cent Ans d'Histoire: L'Alliance Israélite Universelle et la Renaissance Juive Contemporaine (1860-1960)*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1965. 146-200.

favor with the colonizing power, gaining a new form of protection while shedding the humiliating stigma of *dhimmi*.

The idea that assimilating to another language, culture, and established set of social mores is the key to upward mobility was not unique in the Jewish experience. It has been after all the immigrant experience, particularly in the experience of the East European Jews immigrating to the United States. The promotion of language and culture however in North Africa was acculturation of a much different nature.

According to popular accounts, a pair of Jewish businessmen figure prominently in the circumstances surrounding the French conquest of the region. In 1797 David Bacri and Naphtali Busnach, had sold millions of francs worth of grain to the French Republic. They were able to effect this transaction with financing from Dey Hussein Ibn-Al Hussein. This sum was not repaid by the French, and as a result Bacri and Busnach defaulted on their loan from the Dey who became irate. This series of events led to the assassination of Busnach and the execution of Bacri for the crime of defaulting on a loan. In 1827, during an official visit by the French consul Pierre Deval to the palace of the Dey Hussein, the Dey inquired whether Charles X had sent a note regarding the repayment of seven million francs. When Deval said "no", the Hussein dealt Deval an infamous "*coup d'éventail*" – he struck him with a fan. (Some accounts say the blow was delivered with a flyswatter or flywhisk.)

Popular legend points to this *coup d'éventail* as the catalyst for the French conquest of Algeria. Other pro-colonialist accounts claim that France had a noble "civilizing mission." In 1884, Historian Léon Galibert described the French goals.

"France took its turn, after so many other famous peoples, to impose its laws on North Africa; to her fell the difficult and dangerous mission of reviving and expanding in this land the civilization which Rome in former times had there deposited...a new, strong people was needed, governed by generous notions and the great principle of humanitarianism, to bring Africa out of the mindless state into which it had been plunged by twenty centuries of oppression, war, struggles and invasion...."[11]

Though, on the surface, both of the explanations discussed above served as pretexts for the invasion, more significant reasons should be noted. The Dey of Algeria had been permitting the harbor of Algiers to be a safe haven for international pirates. Several countries, including Great Britain, France, Spain, and the United States, all of whom had maritime interests in that part of the world, had grown tired of losing valuable cargo to pirates. They gave multiple warnings to the government of Algeria to quit harboring their nemeses, but the warnings were ignored. The issue of piracy was a long-brewing controversy that, in large part, led to the military intervention on the part of the French. Additionally, France saw an opportunity to reap financial rewards by expanding its territories; it is unlikely that bringing "civilization" to the land was a sufficient reason for launching a full-fledged invasion. As for the *coup d'éventail,* the great insult to the French consul, it has been the event that popular legend points to when trying to establish a simplistic cause-and-effect chronology of events. The background and the events that culminated in the French invasion of Algerian are much more complex than one wave of

[11] Galibert, Léon. *L'Algérie ancienne et moderne* (1st ed.), Paris : 1844. Cited by Richard Wall. "Algeria 1830: A Legacy of Occupation." Lewrockwell.com. April 22, 2004. <http://www.lewrockwell.com/wall/wall24.html>.

a flyswatter, but the fact that Jews were at the center of this historical legend is a sign of how deeply engrained they were in North African society.

The existence of Jewish communities in the Maghreb dates back long before the Bacri-Busnach affair. Their presence has been attested in the region since before the Arab conquest and even before the Roman invasions. Oral traditions in some communities, particularly the fishing port of Djerba in Tunisia, trace their roots to First Temple times and the Babylonian exile. There is no specific dating for the arrival of the first Jews in the area, but an early Jewish presence among the Berber populations is undisputed. There are even accounts of Berber tribes converting *en masse* to the Israelite religion, and the Jews of the region claimed that *Kahéna*, the Berber chieftainess renowned for leading a valiant resistance against the Almohade invasions, was herself Jewish. Historical evidence, or lack thereof, calls into question the veracity of this claim.[12] Just the same, her legend was a source of pride for the Jews of North Africa, with tales of her greatness appearing in Judeo-Arabic poems and other pieces folklore. She was so much a part of their identity that her story was captured by more than one Judeo-Maghrebi[13] writer and the local publishing house in Tunisia was named for her. Ryvel (Raphaël Lévy) for one, published almost exclusively with "La Kahéna."[14]

Another significant source for the Jewish population of North Africa was the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. In the events leading up to and following the

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[12] Hannoum, Abdelmajid. "Historiography, Mythology, and Memory in Modern North Africa." *Studia Islamica*. No. 85, 1997. 85-130. Abdelmajod refers to a poem written in Judeo-Arabic that describes the Kahena. David Cazes who translated the poem into French says this poem refutes her status as a Jew, while another Jewish source claims that it actually verifies it.

[13] Véhel, Jacques. *"La belle Kahéna."* *La Hara Conte*. Les Éditions Ivrit. Paris. 1929. 99-106.

[14] On Ryvel's choice of publishing with La Kahéna: Goldmann, Annie. *"Langue et creation littéraire."* Pardes : *Littérature et judéite dans les langues européennes*. Vol. 21. 1995. 55-58.

expulsion, a great many Jews sought refuge in the familiar climates of North Africa. This migration had a profound effect on the cultural makeup of the Jews in North Africa, bringing a European influence but specifically sephardi in nature. In general, the Jews of various backgrounds mixed and formed one community, but in many instances, especially in Morocco, there was a divide and a rivalry between sephardi Jews, Arab Jews, and Berber Jews, all of whom, for hundreds of years, remained culturally and geographically separated from each other.

Whatever the origins of the communities, there was a large Jewish presence in the Maghreb which pre-dated the arrival of the French by more than three hundred years. The communities were products of the Arab influence, speaking a Jewish *patois* of Arabic (Judeo-Arabic) or Ladino, a Jewish patois of Spanish. Upon the arrival of the French colonial influences, Judeo-Berber, Judeo-Arab, and Judeo-Spanish cultures had been part of the make-up of the communities of the Maghreb. Engrained into these cultures was the institutional acceptance by Jews of their subordinate existence as *dhimmi,* which relegated them to the status of second class citizens. When the French came, they represented a combination of military might and Enlightenment philosophy, and so the Jews perceived that the colonizer had the power to enforce their ideals while protecting the vulnerable minority. Seeing that a powerful outside influence had introduced itself into North Africa, promoting the ideal of equality of men, the Jews sensed a chance to ally themselves with the new power in the region and perhaps to escape their institutionalized poverty. They more readily seized these opportunities than did their

Muslim neighbors because, as a group, they had much more to gain, and they also had the support of a strong, wealthy, and ideologically driven group of co-religionists in France[15].

As the French colonial presence grew and eventually established protectorates in the countries of the Maghreb, those countries became extensions of *France Metropole*, and the indigenous populations became like immigrants in the lands of their ancestors. As with real immigrant experiences, the desire to integrate brought pressures for acculturating and adapting to the ideals of the dominant culture. As the study of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Hugo began to replace traditional *Talmud Torah*, the importance of Jewish practice was undermined. The ideals of Enlightenment philosophy came into conflict with the teachings of rabbinic sages, and religion was divorced from reason[16]. Prayer lost its significance, along with the role of daily spiritual rituals. Emancipated Jews no longer confined to the ghettoes discovered that they could neglect the Commandments with impunity. Little attention was paid, if any, to *kashrut*, and it was not uncommon for Jews to violate Sabbath restrictions partaking in, among other things, a Shabbat cigarette. This type of assimilation is not atypical of immigrant experiences to which, as has already been stated, this can be loosely compared. A closer analogy is the general reaction of Jewish communities to the Emancipation. What was different in North Africa, compared to the experiences of Jews in France or in the United States, was that in many ways, the Jews had already acculturated to the lifestyle of their lands, in the manner of their dress, their cuisine, and their language. They in many ways had borrowed from the Arab and Muslim lifestyles (though they certainly did not participate fully in them). The Jewish communities had a character that was particularly North African in nature, and they

[15] Primarily the Jews behind the creation of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*
[16] Chouraqui, André. *Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord.* Paris : Hachette, 1985. 282. *"Une divorce venait de naitre entre intelligence et la religion..."*

belonged to the place already in a way the Jews of Central Europe had not. Just the same, they recognized significant opportunities by participating with the colonizers. There were risks because in order to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the French, they were required to break not only from the familiar North African ways, but also their Jewish ways in favor of a more secularized culture. At the same time, though the French had a great interest in advancing the Jewish minority, there was no guarantee that they would ever completely accept them.[17] Chouraqui calls this a "double rupture,"[18] cut off from Jewish and North African roots but ultimately rejected by French culture.

This double rupture, having left a culture in which their roots ran deep and falling short of achieving full acceptance in the culture they sought, was a common theme as well as a prime motivator in the literary creativity of the Maghrebi Jewish writers. Not far beneath the surface of the narratives, thinly veiled, there is almost always a double critique in response to the double rupture. Characters are frequently torn between the traditions, not only of the Jewish community, but the larger community, the culture of the cities in which they lived. Tradition as well as modern education are equally exposed for their powers to destroy lives and families. There is an inherent irony in play here. Annie Goldmann elaborates on this irony in her study of the impact of language in the literary creation of North African Jews. She is specifically responding to Albert Memmi's *Statue de Sel* (Pillar of Salt).

> "He [Memmi] was denouncing the dominant culture while using its language. And there was a paradox in the fact that the ones who could read this critique had benefited from the educational opportunities it

[17] This is an important theme in the writing of Albert Memmi
[18] Chouraqui, André. *Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord*. Paris : Hachette, 1985. 283.

> offered. But Memmi had to write in the language of the dominating force because he like the other Jews of Tunisia could no longer access Arabic."[19]

Goldmann focuses on the departure form the language of Arabic and the use of French, the language of the "dominant culture," as her examples of the double rupture, but languages were merely symbolic of the overall separations from the two cultures. Language was the catalyst for change. André Chouraqui has observed that after a person changes languages, "he will soon change his way of thinking, his manners, and possibly his soul."[20] In other words, language is the catalyst which drives all subsequent internal changes[21].

Since the appropriation of the new language was such an important component in the changes in the Jewish communities of the Maghreb, especially in the lives of the wirters, it is helpful to take a closer look at the educational system that brought the French language to the region. Guy Dugas who has done extensive work on literature of marginal ethnic groups and particularly literature of Jews in Muslim lands has identified schools being the focal point for the great changes that occurred in the Jewish communities of the Maghreb.

> "School is the place where the language is learned, the language in which, abandoning Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, the young generations are going to express themselves, the language which will motivate their knowledge, and

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[19] Goldmann, Annie. *"Langue et creation litteraire."* Pardes : Litétrature et judéité dans les langues européennes. Vol. 21. 1995. 55-58.
[20] Chouraqui, André. Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord. Paris : Hachette, 1985. 354.
[21] Just before this Chouraqui points out that even before a person changes languages, he is likely to change his manner of dress. This seems, in Chouraqui's view to be only a superficial change, but when language changes, it leads to substantive changes in individuals and in the community.

eventually their imaginations. It is also the place for acculturation, for meeting the West, and from their rupture with the Arab majority."[22]

It was through education that Jews assimilated to the ideas and manners introduced by France. "It was at school where they learned French, the vehicle and the means of transmission of a new civilization."[23]

In Algeria, the process of educating the Jews in French language and culture began long before the Crémieux Decree of 1870 turned all Algerian Jews into French citizens overnight. The agreement of Saint Cloud that detailed the terms of Algeria's surrender to French forces included a stipulation that the French would take charge of the education of the Jewish children in the land.[24] This included both their secular as well as religious educations. Jewish participation in these state-run schools was a radical departure from the traditional system of the *kouttab* whose structure in many ways had resembled the Eastern Europen *cheder*. In this system the role of educator was the exclusive domain of the synagogues and ultimately the rabbis. Learning was focused on the memorization of Torah, Talmud, and the daily liturgies. Study of secular topics was regarded as profane and thus ignored. Lessons were taught based on the rabbi-teachers' own translations of the Hebrew texts into Judeo-Arabic, and it was not uncommon for teachers to deliver a weekly *derash* that was incomprehensible to the students. The reach of *kouttab* educational system was limited, limited to a small minority of Jews. Only boys were permitted to take part. Of those boys, only the exceptional few who excelled at Torah study by rote memorization or who belonged to one of the more affluent families

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[22] Dugas, Guy. La Littérature Judéo-Maghrébine d'Expression Française: Entre Djeha et Cagayous. Paris : Editions l'Harmattan, 1990. 29.
[23] Chouraqui, André. Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord. Paris : Hachette, 1985. 379.
[24] Dugas, Guy. La Littérature Judéo-Maghrébine d'Expression Française: Entre Djeha et Cagayous. Paris : Editions l'Harmattan, 1990. 30

would advance to the *yeshivot*, usually located in Europe, for the purpose of becoming rabbis. Consequently, prior to the French conquest of Algeria, a vast majority of Jewish boys ended their formal studies at the age of thirteen, the age of *bar-mitzvah*.[25] They would then have to begin working, usually in their fathers' businesses, locking them into the same lifestyle and economic situation, for better or for worse, as the previous generation.

The French system of education privileged reason as the focal point of education rather than memorization of sacred texts. As part of this change, subjects like history and grammar became significant components of the schools' curricula. Influenced by the *Wissenschaft* tradition, even religious education began including these scholarly approaches to the development and context of secular and religious knowledge. The French, who perceived North African society as being stuck somewhere between the 10th and 14th centuries, saw their mission to be forcing the Maghreb communities out of the dark ages, and bringing them up to date with the modern world. Significantly, the modernizing process was included education for young Jewish girls, something which surprisingly received little resistance. Even the *Consistoire Central*[26], as its influence reached Algeria with the colonial expansion, took an active role in educating Algerian Jews. Less than three years after the French invasion, they began making plans to establish primary and secondary schools in Algeria. Their mission was to advance the education of their co-religionists while assuring that there would be a commitment to religious education.

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[25] The literature often refers to this ritual as "*communion*."
[26] The central organization of French Jewish communities,

Not everyone at first accepted these changes. The most resistance understandably came from the rabbis who did not want to relinquish control of the schools, which had long been a source of prestige as well as their primary source of income. They advised parents not to send their children to the state schools, and as a result, enrollment in the schools suffered in the early years. The rabbis eventually had to acquiesce as the government took over all education funds and offered enticements to the rabbis to gain their buy-in. Remunerated by the government, they retained control of religious education, but could only accept students in the synagogue schools who were succeeding in their secular studies in the French schools. The second source of resistance was the parents. The traditionalist among them believed there was no value in obtaining a secular education and that the children's religious lives would suffer. There was also an underlying fear of physically losing their children. This fear stemmed from the false impression that enrollment in the French schools would lead to conscription in the French army. Parents balked at sending their children to the state schools, believing they would be sent off to war, never to be seen again. Eventually this myth was dispelled, and Jewish enrollment in the French schools increased.

With regard to the French influence on education, the experiences of Jews in Tunisia and in Morocco were similar to those of the Jews in Algeria. The main differences between them stem from the fact that they held the status of protectorates and were never made into colonies. Thus the schooling offered to the Jewish communities came under the auspices of private organizations rather than governmental agencies.[27] Prior to the establishment of the first school of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in

[27] Dugas, Guy. *La Littérature Judéo-Maghrébine d'Expression Française: Entre Djeha et Cagayous*. Paris : Editions l'Harmattan, 1990. 30

Morocco in 1862, emancipation of Jews via education was offered by Christian organizations. A priest named Abbé Bourgade was the first to open up classes for Jews in Tunisia. Several Protestant missionaries from England had also followed suit with some classes open for Jews and Christians together. This fact is believed to be a reason for the strong bonds that developed between Jews and Christians in Tunisia and Morocco.[28] The scope and nature of the educational opportunities for Jews changed with the creation of the *Alliance* and the implantation of their schools in the Maghreb. The education was to include lessons taught to Jews by Jews and was to include courses in Hebrew grammar as well as Jewish history. The impact of the *Alliance*, as has already been mentioned, was much more profound in Tunisia and Morocco than in Algeria, whose communities enjoyed the state education that came with the colonial status. Yet despite the different sources of educational funds, the overall effect was much the same in all three countries. The shared mission of the French government and the *Alliance* was the emancipation and modernization of the oppressed Jewish communities living under Muslim rule in North Africa. Modernizing and emancipating meant they had to be educated in secular studies so that they could take part in an enlightened society. Religious education in both situations was at best an afterthought that was poorly executed. As a result, the importance of Jewish observances and practices in North Africa became greatly diminished. This struggle between ties to religion and embracing Western culture was a prominent theme addressed by many of the authors in the stories they recorded and wrote. The title character in *Mazaltob* by Blanche Bendahan, for example, finds herself torn between her desires to assimilate and her ties to tradition and family that keep her anchored in the *mellah*.

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[28] Chouraqui, André. *Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord.* Paris : Hachette, 1985. 383.

Despite the similarities of purpose and the outcomes, there were important differences in method. The *Alliance* created an intricate network of schools not only focused on academics, but also on vocational and agricultural training. They also established an elaborate system of promotions devoted to the training of teachers. (This important piece of the *Alliance* method will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.) Another activity that set the *Alliance* schools apart from the state schools in Algeria was that they took charge of the overall well-being of their constituents, at times acting as much like a welfare agency as a school system.

The *A.I.U.* was created by French Jews to improve the overall lives of their co-religionists living in Muslim countries, where a majority of the Jews lived in poverty, education had previously been limited to religious education in *kouttab* schools, and where hygiene and cleanliness, according to Western standards, were largely ignored. The initial plan of the A.I.U. was to expose Jewish boys and girls of the Maghreb to literature, mathematics, and the sciences. Though they did think it important to provide a basic knowledge of Jewish history, religious education was mostly ignored since it was seen as viewed as inessential to bringing the communities up to date with modern times. Attempts to flesh out the curriculum with a Jewish component for an hour each day failed miserably because the teachers, the communal rabbis and the former *kouttab* teachers, possessed archaic teaching styles that could not appeal to students who fast became accustomed to the highly trained teachers of the *Alliance*. The primary interests of the *Alliance* were culture and social status, which were to be improved by means of education. The focus of their curriculum was prominently posted in every classroom,

"*Parlez français!*"[29]— "Speak French!" Students were indoctrinated with the idea that speaking French would provide them with a ticket to better lives. Thus courses were taught in French at the expense of Hebrew, the language of the synagogue, and of Judeo-Arabic, the language spoken in the students' homes. In places of A.I.U. involvement, language became compartmentalized to various locales and specific tasks. An observation made by an A.I.U. teacher in Turkey describes in visual terms the way in which various languages were applied.

> "Turkish [the language of the majority] is like a borrowed suit; French is gala dress; Judeo-Spanish is the worn dressing gown in which one is most at ease."[30]

The reactions in North Africa were much the same.

Beyond teaching language, science, and culture, there was more to the agenda of the *A.I.U.* They also had a moral mission since many Eastern ways were repugnant to their Western sensibilities. The prevalence of child brides, some as young as twelve or thirteen, was a major concern. As Aron Rodrigue has described:

> "The Orient was the repository of many evils which had to be uprooted. The Alliance, true to its time, had no doubts about the superiority of the West in all aspects of life. Westernization was the path of progress, the only means for the 'regeneration' of the 'degenerate' Eastern Jew."[31]

The "degenerate" Eastern Jew that Rodrigue was referring to led a life which revolved around archaic customs and ancient superstitions. Medicine, even toward the end of the

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[29] Dugas, Guy. *La Littérature Judéo-Maghrébine d'Expression Française: Entre Djeha et Cagayous*. Paris : Editions l'Harmattan, 1990. 30.

[30] Archives of the AIU, France XVII.F.28. in Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries In Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993. 131.

[31] Rodrigue, Aron. Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries In Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993. 73.

19th century, was still regarded as magic rather than science. All forms of illness, physical or mental, were regarded as attacks by evil spirits. The people believed themselves to be susceptible to the supernatural forces of nature, and the only ways to cure them were through folk remedies and talismans to ward off the evil eye. The *A.I.U.* recognized that they needed to promote education beyond academic subjects. They needed to re-educate Maghrebi Jews in their spiritual lives as well. Addressing this purpose, the handbook written for *A.I.U.* teachers included the following directive:

> "The true goal of the primary schools, especially in the East, is not so much instruction as education. Education includes both intellectual and moral education."[32]

The desire to provide Jews of the Maghreb with a moral education was fueled by the overarching goal of the A.I.U. to improve the quality of life for Jews living in Muslim lands. In order to achieve this goal, teachers had to reach beyond the classroom. Their job frequently switched from instructor to social welfare worker, making sure that students were receiving proper nutrition and were practicing proper hygiene. They saw their task as a "civilizing mission" or a "regenerating mission" for their co-religionists. For this reason, *A.I.U.* teachers and envoys have come to be referred to as the "Jewish Missionaries of France." Elizabeth Antébi explains that though the term "missionary" connotes a practice which goes against Jewish sensibilities, the missionaries of the *A.I.U.* sought not to convert anyone to a new religion, but rather to give fellow Jews access to the world of progress and ultimately to liberty.[33]

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[32] *"Instructions générales pour les professeurs," Alliance Israélite Universelle*, Paris 1903. 28-29. (cited in Images, p. 72.)

[33] Antébi, Elizabeth. *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France: 1860-1939*. Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1999. 13.

Also a reason that the work of *Alliance* teachers was called "missionary" work was the care they took for students' health and nutrition. Prior to the arrival of the first French and the first *Alliance* teachers, it was not uncommon for disease epidemics to ravage the Jewish quarters. The communities suffered from high rates of miscarriages and infant mortality, and at times the overall death rate greatly exceeded the birth rate. These poor health conditions was due in part to the fact that in these religious communities, bathing was generally done only for the fulfillment of religious obligations, and even then, the ritual bath houses were as polluted as sewers. Daily clothing was rarely washed, with the exception of Shabbat, when clean clothes would be worn, at least for one day each week. As a result of poor hygiene practices, breakouts of communicable diseases like tuberculosis and syphilis were regular occurrences. The other main contributing factor to the high death rate was the poor nutrition resulting from the lowly economic situation of the *hara* and their limited access to outside resources. Some communities benefited from the presence of a European doctor, provided through the auspices of the *Alliance*, but by and large, the burden fell on the shoulders of those who were placed on the front lines—the *Alliance* teachers. The teachers found themselves teaching basic hygiene in the classrooms, making sure that students' hair was washed, and seeing to it that students received enough to eat even if it meant paying a visit to the students' homes or delivering parcels of food to the families. With the holistic care offered by the *Alliance*, the health of North African Jews improved along with their social standing.

As it has already been stated, the process of acculturation and emancipation for Jews of the Maghreb was long and its success did not occur by simply educating one

generation. To support their mission, the *Alliance* devised a plan that would help motivate its students and assure the continuity of their efforts. Training of teachers was a significant piece of this strategy. Early on, *A.I.U.* leaders recognized that their long-term success depended on their having teachers who not only bought into French cultural ideals, but who were also familiar with their students' lives. For this reason, they created *l'Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale*. The top students in the *A.I.U.* schools were recruited to go to Paris and attend the *E.N.I.O.*'s intensive teacher training program. The goals of the four-year program went beyond academic education. As André Chouraqui has described:

> They [the *E.N.I.O.*] sought to provide them with a complete education: figuring into the program were gymnastics courses and also productions of classics at the *Théatre Français*.[34]

The future teachers were exposed to Western lifestyle, encouraged to participate in physical activity as well as engage French culture. These one-time underprivileged and uneducated Jews were immersed in European culture and indoctrinated with the attitudes and philosophy of the Continent. When their training was complete, they would be sent to a country other than the one they came from, and would either teach in one of the A.I.U. schools or would be charged with establishing a new school in a selected community. There they would spread their acquired love for French life, language, art, music, and literature. They were charged by the *A.I.U.* with providing the "complete education," academics and Western values in order to fulfill their mission of improving the lives of Jewish communities living in Muslim lands.

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[34] Chouraqui, André. *Cent Ans d'Histoire : L'Alliance Israélite Universelle et la Renaissance Juive Contemporaine.* Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1965. 179.

While their physical and economic lives were being regenerated through education, language, and culture, their religious lives suffered. Religious practices among the Jews of North Africa had been formed in the mold of ancient, traditional customs, customs which had been steeped in superstitions. Quashing what seemed to the French like antiquated folk superstitions that had grown out of the Jews' religious lives had been a priority of the French process of acculturation. Through education and promotion of enlightened culture, reason took on more importance than tradition. Also the methods of religious education paled in comparison to the educational methods applied by French government agencies and by the *A.I.U.* The younger generations lost interest in learning and participating in their religious heritage, and once the religious courts were superseded by the civil courts through the process of emancipation, the central controls over Jewish life fell apart. Consistent with a familiar historical trend, when the Jewish community was no longer governed by rabbinic courts, laxity in observance followed. The *Consistoire Central* in France worked to stop the rapid assimilation, but as André Chouraqui observed, the Jews who had tasted emancipation and who had disdain for their former lowly lives tended to "throw the baby out with the bath water."[35] Efforts to curb assimilation failed. One effort involved sending promising rabbinical students to France to learn a modernized expression of Judaism which was consistent with the modern world. However, very few of the European trained rabbis returned to North Africa to share what they had learned. The doors to assimilation had been opened wide, and through them marched thousands of Jews who left synagogue pews sparsely populated. This becomes an important them in Judeo-Maghrebi literature, in which books like Blanche Bendahan's Mazaltob look on religious life concurrently with nostalgia and disdain. Assimilated life,

[35] Chouraqui, Andre. *Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord*. Paris : Hachette, 1985. 382.

in books like Elissa Rhaïs's *Les juifs ou la fille d'Éléazar*, is equally a recipient of mixed responses, both glorious and shameful.

The world of Judeo-Maghrebi writers was one in transition Many new freedoms opened up to the Jews of North Africa including the freedom, as central religious institutions broke down, to separate themselves from the Jewish religious community.[36] As stated before, they were like immigrants in their own country, invited to join a culture which had been imported from its place of origin to a new land. Seeing the potential advantages, many Jews embraced the opportunities which enabled them to reach new social status, better protections for their personal safety, and new occupational and educational opportunities. The key to accessing these benefits was language. By learning the French language and mastering it to the level of creating literary art in it, they willingly underwent "taming" much like Saint-Exupéry's fox. Acculturation was desirable as well for its opportunities for social advancement and emancipation. Trained in the ways of the conquering nation, their writing was like that of the lion in Achebe's parable- glorifying the hunter. Even though their work eventually became critical of colonization, its very existence was a testament to the success of the French ideals, and the mark of colonization is found throughout the literature. Isaac Yetiv, one of the leading experts in Maghrebi literature has described this influence.

> "[French colonialism] is the source of conflicts between individuals, between generations, and between different social groups; it has left its imprint on individuals and societies. It is the active force that brings about changes and revolutions. French colonialism and its corollaries, language and culture, make up

[36] In *Les juifs ou la fille d'Éléazar*, Elissa Rhaïs shows a sharp contrast between the assimilated Jews and the religious minority who had little contact with one another.

the common denominator, the background, constant setting for literary production in the Maghreb."[37][38]

The doctrine of *liberté, egalité, fraternité*, the belief in advocating rights for all mankind, was manifest in the fact that the writers were free to offer critiques of the abuses suffered in their pasts, their religious authorities, and their struggles to adapt to Western sensibilities. Use of language was the key barometer for success in evaluating the attempt to spread culture. Among other key factors, an important measure of success is also found in looking at who was writing. The fact that many women are counted among the writers of Judeo-Maghrebi literature means that gender equality in education was embraced. This changed the entire social structure. With access to formal education, new avenues were opened to women, avenues that could gradually lead them away from the subservient lives that the old traditions required. Language, culture, family structures, and religion were forever changed for Maghrebi Jews, and it was the mission of the writers who emerged amid these changes to recount how their communities responded.

As Guy Dugas has stated, "Literary creation is...always symptomatic of a desire achieve a visibility, a form of individual and collective recognition."[39] Clearly, the Jewish writers of North Africa felt that there was something worthy of recognition in the combination of their heritage and their modern experiences. In many instances, their efforts were to preserve the past, their folklore, their memories of the lives they knew. Yet also, they wanted to share their reactions to the collision of cultures from the East

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[37] Yétiv, Isaac. *"L'Évolution thématique du roman maghrébin." Présence Francopone* 1-3 (1970-1971). 57.

[38] Yetiv is addressing all Maghrebi literature, but his observation works especially well for the Jewish literature of which the creation predated Muslim French literature by nearly 50 years.

[39] Dugas, Guy. *"De l'invisibilité au visible."* Lecture transcript posted on the internet, http://www.femmes-med.org/ffm_article.php3?id_article=56

and the West and to the clash between different expressions of Judaism from the Orient and from the Occident. The following chapters will examine various important themes that emerge from their stories and help the readers to determine what in their lives they wanted to make visible to the world.

Chapter 2:

Religious Responses to the Changing Social Climate Evident in Judeo-Maghrebi Literature

Facing a new French presence, the Jewish communities of the Maghreb found themselves in an environment where every aspect of the social order, for better or for worse, was destabilized. In his review of the modern graphic novel, The Rabbi's Cat, by Joann Sfar, David Shasa described a milieu, particularly in Algerian society, "in the throes of some extremely difficult changes and transitions."[40] Indeed it was a time of flux; the stasis that had governed the relations between *dhimmi* Jews and their Arab neighbors was destabilized by the Crémieux Decree, which made Jews full citizens. The democratization of education and the public education that came with the rights of citizenship threatened to secularize society and to lead Jews down a path toward complete assimilation. Inarguably, the greatest casualty along this path of assimilation tends was religious life. With the removal of social disabilities and the breakdown of religious institutions that guaranteed the continuity of Jewish traditions, there remained little, aside from emotional and intellectual ties to tradition, that fostered the pursuit of a religiously Jewish life. It was not necessary to cling to the community for protection, nor was the central authority of the rabbis endowed with enough power to enforce compliance within the Jewish community.

The circumstances described above were assimilationist responses to the free society the French presence offered. Still, even those Jews who did not fully assimilate and maintained their religious customs discovered that the structures of the Jewish

[40] Shasa, David. "Rediscovering the Arab Jewish Past." Sephardic Heritage Update, Newsletter 180, November 26, 2005.

communities themselves were destabilized. The French system of *consistoires* absorbed the Maghrebi Jewish communities into its sphere of influence. In The Rabbi's Cat, Sfar highlights with his artist's pen many of the inherent difficulties that arise from this European, Western religious body imposing its influence in the Sephardic world. Perhaps this clash becomes most clear when the rabbi, a highly sympathetic character who has been a long-time servant to his community, is forced by the French *consistoire* to take a test to determine whether or not he has sufficient knowledge to maintain his position as rabbi. The test is in French, and so the primary obstacle to maintaining his role is his mastery over the cultural value that the French were most interested in spreading—mastery of the French language. The Judaism being advanced was no longer the Judaism that had been practiced by the previous generations, and the religious revolution, which had occurred gradually in the West in response to political upheavals, came to the Maghreb with the timeliness of a coup d'Etat—leaving little time for natural adaptation. In other words, concurrently with the political and societal changes brought by the French to North Africa, came the end results that, in Europe, had taken time to germinate.

Without this time to let the changes develop, sides had to be chosen, and amid the chaos, there developed varying reactions characterized Jews of the Maghreb. These reactions, as they are represented in Judeo-Maghrebi literature, seem to gravitate toward two poles. On one end of the spectrum, there were those who, Sfar's work describes, maintained a nostalgia for the religious traditional life; regardless of their own personal practices, they were sympathetic toward Jewish traditions. On the other side of the spectrum were writers who reacted to tradition with disdain, going so far as to account it as a destructive force deserving no place in an enlightened world. At times, both elements

may be present in the same work, especially since the authors were appealing to a French readership with a taste for the exotic-- as anything from the Magrheb was viewed, whether "exotic tales" of 1,001 Arabian Nights or a window into the lives of Jews living in this mysterious, "exotic" place. Among the motivating forces behind the French audience's penchant for what would be called "orientalism," was that, in the critiques of tradition, they could seek and find validation for the correctness of their own society.

This chapter will examine several representations of Jewish tradition as they appeared in the literature that responded to the introduction of French culture and language in the region. There were various ways in which authors showed their reactions. Portrayals of the rabbis were a prominent way in which the writers expressed their attitudes. Another way was the exposition of customs, many of which included superstitions which were unique to Sephardic tradition or even to the Maghreb—some were painted in a positive, endearing light while others were shown to be archaic if not non-sensical. Finally, reactions to familial and societal controls which, as they were laid out, ran the gamut from being the necessary glue that holds families together to being the antithesis of progressive, egalitarian ideals. Let us look at them in some detail.

One way to gain insight into a writer's attitudes toward religion is to examine the literary treatment of the rabbi as the embodiment of the Jewish religion. The Rabbi's Cat offers a very sympathetic and nostalgic portrayal of the traditional Algerian rabbi. It also introduces into the story a modern rabbi, molded in the French style. In the end, the book promotes the necessary co-existence of the two men whose rabbinical training is as different as their cultural backgrounds. It also suggests that the two men themselves develop a deep mutual respect for one another, despite the clash between old world and

new world practices. (This respect is obligatory since the young Parisian rabbi marries the older rabbi's daughter). The writings of the Judeo-Maghrebi writers of the early 20th century do not provide glimpses of the modern rabbi, nor are they always as genial in their descriptions of the traditional ones. The severity of the attitudes varies between the three countries of the *Maghreb,* as do the descriptions of each writer who responds to the experiences in the communities and the countries in which he lives.

One of the most negative views of rabbis was put forth by Tunisian writer Vitalis Danon in his novella *Ninette de la rue du péché,* a story which offers a rather dismal view of the rabbi's role in society. As a teacher in a Tunisian school in the Alliance Israelite Universelle system, as well as a product of the E.N.I.O. Danon was fully invested in the concept of *salut par l'Ecole*. Accordingly, the rabbi is presented as an unnecessary, dying breed who is becoming increasingly superfluous in the Tunisian society. Though as readers, we never actually meet the rabbi in this story, we do encounter him through the first-person narration expressed in the voice of Ninette, the story's titular protagonist. Danon's attitude toward rabbis, expressed in Ninette's naiveté, comes to light in the following passage:

> You should see the beggars, the elderly, the handicapped, the drunkards, the blind—all the clientele of this rabbi. Oh how their eyes are open wide as they listen to him. They are so cast under his spell that they fall asleep and snore ever so deeply, those poor souls. (pp. 20-21)

This is hardly an endorsement for the rabbi and his functions. Even less compelling is Ninette's physical description of the religious leader.

He is from Djerba with a thick mustache that engulfs his mouth and a long black beard that seems to never end. But he is brilliant. Ah! I don't even have to say, he is well-spoken. (p. 20)

Djerba is an island off the coast of Tunisia. Its Jewish community was reputed to date back to First Temple times. Isolated from the rest of the country, its population tended to be untouched by the advancements of modernization. Djerba's Jews maintained the older style of Jewish dress as well as the traditional customs. Danon's very mentioning of Djerba in relation to the rabbi thus connotes what is old and traditional. Adding a layer to the ancient imagery is his beard. Nothing ages a face, real or imagined, as much as a beard. It is a physical sign of maturity as well as an archetypical indicator of advanced age. This sign of maturity might imply that his overall demeanor is old-fashioned, but in certain cultures, it can also be an indicator of power. Ninette's rabbi is described as having an extraordinarily long beard, a trait which hints at his age as well as his grooming practices. For some time, he has allowed his outmoded facial hair to grow until it reached further than Ninette is capable of describing. As for his mustache, though it was in fact fashionable among Frenchmen, a modern would have keep his mustache well-groomed. For the modern reader, the fact that the rabbi's lips are engulfed by facial hair, in addition to his advanced age and the fact that he keeps a long beard, indicates the rabbi's lack of civilization.

A second, equally condemning perspective of rabbis is given when Ninette goes to see another rabbi who wears a turban, an icon of the old style of dress which "came directly from Jerusalem." Nonetheless, the garment itself is not only archaic—it comes from Jerusalem, the place to which the traditionalists hope to return as the true home of

Jews and all things Jewish. By describing the rabbi's turban in these terms, Danon points out how in Ninette's eyes this connection to Jerusalem gives him authenticity. This runs counter to the idea of emancipated French Jews who would have believed that their existence in the diaspora, in an enlightened country which offered liberty and equality, was preferable to hoping for a return to Zion. For the school director in Ninette, French culture and Western Civilization are the sources of authenticity, not the Holy Land and objects whose origins are there.

As much as Ninette admires the rabbi and hangs on his every word, she is but a poor, single mother who has known nothing but misery in her life. She can separate herself from the rest of his pathetic "clientele" made up of elderly who know no better, the disabled whose activities are greatly limited, and the dregs of society who have no other place to go. Just the same, by virtue of her presence alone, she belongs with this group. Moreover, with her lowly social status and her lack of education, she truly has a place in the sparsely populated synagogue pews. What however seems to set her apart is that, as an observer of the soporific effect of the rabbi's homilies, she remains the lone, attentive listener. She hangs on his every word, and since she has nothing, her only source of hope comes from his teachings which offer assurances of justice in the afterlife.

> ...there [in death] where there is no more shame, or disappointment, or birth certificates, or bastards, or anything. All are equal my beautiful ladies, all eaten by the worms, with a little pillow of earth under their heads and a hefty stone on their stomachs. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it is just like I say, just as it is written in our books that the rabbi reads in the synagogue. You haven't heard him? I urge you to go. *Aïe, aïe,* what you will learn about what awaits on the other side! It is

> so in order to keep us from pretending to be wise here since we all end up the same *kif-kif* [as dust], the fat and the thin, the wicked and the good, those who wear shoes and the shoeless, like those who get around in their automobiles. That is no small consolation, my girl. (p. 17)

The rabbi here is the purveyor of hope. Those like Ninette who have gained little in the material world turn their attention to the spiritual. In her life filled with resentment from being denied joy and happiness during her life, Ninette takes solace in assuring herself in the biblical idea that all Men were equal in their origins, being created from dust: they will be equal in their deaths, returning to dust. Her comfort comes not in her hope of improving her lot in eternity, but rather that all will be equal, perhaps equally miserable, in death. Justice is not about reward, but rather the leveling of status. This idea would be especially comforting to those in the most dire straits. There is however no call to action, no instilling of ambition to strive for betterment of one's life in the here and now. Though this may not have been precisely what the rabbis were teaching in Tunisia, this is the message that Danon proposes people like Ninette might have understood and embraced. This understanding would be objectionable to those who had bought into the French ideals which allowed for a literate person to rise above social status by means of study and hard work. The inclusion of Ninette's interpretation here, which Danon represents as a shallow superstition, serves to evoke pathos in the reader as it emphasizes the point that only someone who had to believe something so absurd could actually do so. The rabbi's role is as the perpetuator of progress-stifling superstitions. In Danon's description of the congregation, a line is drawn between the uneducated and ignorant, and the enlightened moderns who have voted with their feet by not entering the synagogue. The rabbi is the

symbol of the old ways whose superstition-laden paths led to poverty, sadness, and oppression. He is juxtaposed with the school director, who symbolizes literacy, culture, equality, and ultimately opportunity. In contrast to the rabbi's, the school director's constituents, his "congregation," are presumably the educated, more successful Tunisian Jews who have purposefully chosen not to listen to the rabbi.

If religion is regarded as superstition, as it is in Ninette, there is then perhaps no greater element of superstition than the concept of Messiah, the belief and a particular person or entity who will bring redemption to the Jewish people and to the world. In religious dogmas, interpretations and predictions of messianic redemption have provided the clearest dividing lines between various faiths, even those who have shared the base of monotheism. Conflicting beliefs over messianic predictions between believing Jews, Christians, and Muslims have provided much of the historical tensions between them. There has even been a history of infighting within each individual faith as to what will bring about the age of Messiah. An added layer is the conflict, evident in Ninette, between those who are devout in their beliefs in Messiah and the secular rejection of supernatural predictions based on superstition. Ninette begins by holding a fanciful conception of her life after redemption.

> ...the more one has troubles down here, the more one gains in the hereafter. For example, me the unhappy, the abandoned, I will sit on a golden throne, and then, on the ground, in my home, there will be rug upon rug. And in the streets, everywhere, there will be flowers and greenery instead of this dirty filth that plagues us.

It will no longer be necessary to go the public ritual bath and argue for your turn, the water will flow at your feet, more pure than a diamond." (p. 20)

Despite her clinging to the hopes of the equality offered by death, and the utopia in the world to come, Ninette ends up rejecting the rabbi's message of messianic redemption, because the fulfillment of that prophesy requires a wait of undetermined length. She is impatient in her longing for a real-life *deus ex machina.*

As Ninette talks to the school director, there is a sense that she is aware of his skepticism. She opens by asking him not to mock her.

> "Don't laugh at me. Alas! Sometimes I tell myself: If I, Ninette, were God almighty—quite an assumption, isn't it?—or if I were at least something like that, I would have brought widespread destruction to the world. And then we would begin again. We would start all over from the beginning.
>
> But it seems—as the rabbi says—that He has already done it once and that it did not work. Too bad, don't you think? So now, to hold us over, they promise us the Messiah." (p. 19)

Perhaps embarrassed by her waffling in matters of faith, or perhaps uncertain whether or not the school director will view her favorably, at the end of this statement she asks him if he himself actually believes in the Messiah. She likely knows his answer before posing this question, but in her asking, she seems to seek affirmation for the doubts that had just surfaced while she voiced her religious musings to the director. She is bothered by her conclusions and is torn between her belief in all the rabbi says and her skepticism that he will say anything to stave off attacks against the tradition by Jews who wonder why the balance among people the world over has yet to be equalized. Ninette

later concretizes her opinion of the rabbi as liar, at least in matters pertaining to the Messiah. She seeks counsel from another local rabbi and describes her former religious leader as the "long-bearded Djerban who gives lovely, well-crafted sermons about the Messiah and other lies of that kind" (p. 54). The rabbi is painted as a willing participant in the spread of falsehoods meant to sway weak hearts and minds whose desperate situations have inclined their hearts to believe them. Ninette's rejection of the rabb shows that even the illiterate, upon whom fate has continuously trampled, can only listen to his message for so long before they eventually turn away.

"Sometimes I believe. Sometimes I don't believe what the rabbi says..." (p. 24)

This rejection is the culmination of a long progression of questionable teachings that reduce her opinion of the rabbi from "God's friend" (p. 34) to trickster. Among the questionable things the rabbi tells her is that woman are dim-witted (*cervelle légère,* p. 55), that being raped by her own uncle was her "first sin" (p. 39), and that "what is crooked cannot be straightened" (p. 89). As the story unfolds, the reader senses the unraveling of Ninette's faith, but perhaps the final thread of rabbinic credibility unravels in an episode where Ninette brings a case before the rabbinic court. She comes to file a paternity claim against her former employer and lover who has denied any parental responsibility. The rabbinic court who hears her case sees to it that she is paid for the remaining six months of her pregnancy and then hopes to sweep the whole affair under the carpet. The episode between Ninette and her son's father is used by Danon to highlight a theme: though outer appearances may be appealing, they might just be concealing an ugly truth. The man and his mother appear to be upright members of society, even endorsed by the rabbi, but in the end they turn out to be callous and cruel.

The rabbinic court which purports to advance justice seeks instead to turn aside as the privileged take advantage of the under-privileged. This event is emblematic of the view of religion described throughout the story-- though, on the surface, its teachings provide comfort, they are mere words that offer no material benefit. Ninette says the following about her former employers:

> "...the mask falls and alas one can see the true face, the one they knew so well how to hide. (p. 58)."

This statement seems to be equally directed at the rabbi who receives the final insult. Ninette's saviors turn out to be mortal men-- not divine messengers. Therefore the rabbi is proven to be wrong. At the end of the story, Ninette's last reflection novel makes this clear.

> "God Almighty sends to each person his own Messiah on Earth without making the poor world wait many years and even centuries after one is dead and buried" (p. 104).

The Messiahs in Ninette's life turn out to be the school director who provided her son with an education, her educated son who will eventually support her, and a wealthy man who in his benevolence offers Ninette a job and a place to live. In this acknowledgment of education and the benevolence of man as earthly messiahs, there is a rejection of rabbinic teachings as impractical and lacking compassion. Over the course of the narrative in Ninette, the rabbi is set up by Danon as the symbol of traditional Judaism to be meticulously dismantled and exposed for interfering with intellectual advancement and the betterment of Jewish society in Tunisia.

Jewish traditions in Algeria are the subject of an equally condemning critique in Elissa Rhaïs's novel *Les juifs ou la fille d'Éléazar*. Although religion will ultimately be portrayed as the villain in this story, it is still portrayed in a sympathetic way. Despite the overall critique, Rhaïs still manages to convey a profound respect for Jewish customs. As part of this tension, Rhaïs spares the rabbi who, though he is guardian of old-fashioned ways, is a likeable figure who commits no malicious act but is part of a traditional system much bigger and more powerful than he.

> "There was a burning energy as well as a gentleness in his eye... A white beard adorned his chest, in the style of men of God. His straight nose and long, flaring nostrils, showed disdain for life here below." (p. 3)

The rabbi is passionate, sensitive, and pious. Rhaïs's description presents him as the symbol of traditional Judaism, with "a white beard," labeling it as the unique style for "men of God," a description that indicates he is not only part of a dying breed, but that the religion itself is old-fashioned and white-bearded. The rabbi himself though is a loving father figure, to his daughter Debourah, and to his students in whose accomplishments he takes great pride. Central to the plot of *Les Juifs* is his relationship with his favorite student Jacob.

> "The master took particular interest in him, closely following his progress, like he would for his own son. And he sincerely hoped that the Talmudist would one day be admitted to the Rothschild Seminary in Paris. That would be his pride at the end of his life to have trained a great rabbi who would eventually return to take charge of the Jewish church of Algeria." (p.4)

Rabbi Éléazar also hopes to make Jacob family in a literal sense by seeing his daughter married to the young Talmudist. He makes his student a surrogate son, filling a void in his life left by his wives' only giving him one child- a girl. He remains committed to the old ways, upholding the primary importance of having a male child, but, through his disappointment, he still shows a willingness to be patient.

> "'I will be consoled,' the rabbi would say, 'when I bounce Debourah's sons on my knees.'" (p.12)

In Rhaïs's world, a world of educated, literate women who can become popular writers or who can aspire to professions beyond homemaker, the importance placed on having a son seems to be a critique of a bygone custom. The critique in the portrayal of Rabbi Éléazar's disappointment in only having a daughter is accentuated by the measure he had to take just to have progeny at all. When his wife Esther had not been able to conceive, he took on a second wife, Rachelle. Polygamy had long been absent in the Ashkenazi world. Its only remnant was in corners of the Sephardic communities. Its continued practice would have surprised and intrigued readers from the Western cultures. Rhaïs points out the apparent anachronism.

> "Rabbi Éléazar seemed a patriarch from Mosaic times. The union of these two women in his household was an example of ancient virtue." (p. 12)

Rabbi Éléazar, like the Jews of Algeria, is stuck between two worlds. He is committed to the ancient virtues, and though he and his follower are faced with the reality of changing values, he looks upon the newer ways with contempt.

> "The Rabbi's thoughts turned, on this festival evening, toward the current lowly state of the Jews, the disdain for religion, the dizzying pace of the big cities to

which so many of them were drawn, where they could only acquire vices... and toward contempt for ignorance... and toward many other things, that the Rabbi dared not permit to cross his lips, for fear of disrupting the pure atmosphere of the *sukkah.*" (p. 13)

The rabbi cannot accept the assimilation of Algerian Jews, and it pains him. As critical as she is of the traditional ways, Rhaïs still voices a complaint, through the rabbi, over the loss of Jewish virtues and knowledge. The rabbi is the symbol of those values.

Sensitivity to Jewish customs and even to rabbis was a natural extension of Rhaïs's life, having at one time been married to a rabbi herself. She had an intimate knowledge of life in a traditional Jewish family as well as a familiarity with Jewish texts, both biblical and rabbinic, that she cites making them into critical components of her plot. In fact the plot turns on one short citation from the Zohar, a passage which is discovered by chance as Jacob, one of the main characters, happens to study the page to which the book had been left open.

"Take care of yourself only after you have satisfied the household and the street." (p. 22)

Jacob does not regard his discovery of this text as chance—it is a prophesy. He is therefore going to obey its message to the letter. Jacob's interpretation of the passage causes him to reject his impending engagement with Debourah, the daughter of his beloved teacher Rabbi Éléazar. Instead of marrying her, he determines that the sacred texts require him to see his sisters married with dowries before permitting himself to be paired off with Debourah. This can only be achieved by going to Paris to continue his studies so he can become *grand rabbin*, an illustrious and well remunerated position that

would allow him to provide dowries for his sisters. Meanwhile, Debourah is of the age in Algerian Jewish society, 16, where she cannot wait for Jacob's return and must be married off soon or else she will live her entire life in her father's house as a spinster. Jacob knows that his sisters each run the same risk if they do not have dowries, so he forces himself to choose. Because of one textual passage he knows what he must do, and Rhaïs describes his realization in dramatic fashion.

> "He had to renounce his great love...God himself said it. He had to sacrifice his own happiness for the happiness of his loved ones!" (p. 23)

It seems to be a noble act, the denial of the self in favoring one's family, but in the novel's plot, Jacob's desire to be a rabbi opens the door for the impending tragedy. All blame for anything bad that will happen as a result of Jacob's decision is ascribed to God as the source for the prescriptive texts and to rabbis who follow those texts to the letter. Rhaïs exposes the naiveté inherent in blind adherence to sacred texts and their interpretations. The natural result of this adherence is a strictly regimented society in which girls are married off at a young age as part of a financial agreement that requires the father of the bride to pay a substantial dowry. If Jacob were to follow his heart in pursuit of the love he yearns for, in his mind he would be committing a sin. The sin however, according to Rhaïs, is that Jacob, thinking like a rabbi, ignores his heart and rejects reason which could liberate him from the bindings that prevent him from pursuing his own desires. Neither option which the conflict between tradition and reason leaves open to him, whether he abandons his sisters or abandons his dreams, is appealing. Either choice could lead to significant personal tragedies for Jacob or his loved ones..

Tradition does appear as the villain, but still the purveyor of liberated thinking, the French colonizing force, does not receive a free pass. After all, the emancipation of the Algerian Jewish community included the intrusion of the *Consistoire* into their communal organization. That meant, to follow his dreams, Jacob would have to attend the seminary in Paris because it was the central location for training rabbis, and *semicha*[41], even in the Algerian community, depended on ordination by the Parisian rabbinate. Though God and religion are primarily responsible for keeping Jacob and Debourah apart, the French colonizers are complicit in this deed as well. When Rabbi Éléazar and Debourah each know they cannot wait for Jacob to fulfill her destiny, and so she marries Edmond, from the wealthy, highly assimilated Saffar family who (to their credit) are more interested in Debourah's charms than in the material possessions she brings into the family. In fact they determine that it brings "merit" to be raised poor the way she was. In addition to money not being an object in the matter, Debourah is highly regarded among all the families of Algiers.

> "In all of the most important families, one cites her as the model when they want to speak of the wisest, most pious, and accomplished young girls." (p. 106)

The Saffars themselves are not religious, but they enjoy their proxy relation to the piety of the rabbi's family.

> "[Mister Saffar] had met this holy family whose faces exuded serenity and clearness of thought characteristic of the ancient Hebrews. This maiden[42] had a pure heart and an aura of luck about her... He indeed hoped, with the character that he sensed in her, the strength of spirit, that Debourah would revive family life

[41] Certificate conferred upon a rabbi to verify that he has achieved a sufficient level of study and training to earn the title.
[42] Literally *vierge*, virgin.

in his home, the private joys, the simple pleasures around the festival table, of which he had been so deprived since the death of his elderly parents, and his disappointment with his 'civilized' wife,..." (p. 125)

When Mister Saffar's hopes come to fruition, Debourah's presence in the household improves the behavior of the entire family. He appreciates the old-fashioned values that Debourah's observance represents, but his nostalgia comes more from the feelings that the values evoke than for the practices tied to those values.

"He was brimming with joy. The house was always full. Nobody missed a meal. He saw that, contrary to what the girls had proclaimed[43], it was Debourah who, little by little, was guiding them down the 'ancient' path." (p.180)

With the word "ancient" in quotes, there is an implication that the "ancient ways" are not to be taken too literally. The girls do spend more time at home and listen to Debourah spin yarns from the Bible and the Zohar. Debourah's observance is even respected by the Saffars, but, even though they enjoy the good feeling that she has added to their family, they cannot bring themselves to share fully in the practices. In other words, they would rather enjoy the warmth of the fire Debourah brings into the house without standing directly in the firepit. The language they use to describe the observances enacted by the rabbi's daughter describes it as being old or in the past. Those ways are "ancient." In Mister Saffar's memory, the ones who kept them, his parents, were old, and now they—his parents and their customs with them—have died.

In practical terms, Mister Saffar likes that someone is keeping traditions because they make his household a better place. For him, the "ancient" way means living with the value of family and being surrounded by them. He is grateful to have a conduit to that

[43] The Saffar daughters believed they would influence Debourah, and not the other way around.

ancient way, someone to keep the customs that hold a mysterious power. That power is shown to be greater than the modern ways, because as proven by the fact that the Saffar daughters, had believed their customs would influence Debourah, but in fact, to their father's delight, the opposite occurred. The mysterious power in the prevailing of the "ancient" affected everyone who came into contact with Debourah and helped to create a pleasant household. The power is strong, evoking deep emotion, and it comes to light, in particular, when Debourah pays her first visit to Madame Saffar's parents the, Fassinas. As they celebrate Shabbat, Master Fassina is overwhelmed by her.

> "He felt himself revived in the presence of this beautiful, young, and pure bride who was also learned in the true precepts of the Torah." (p. 191)

Part of the mysterious power, though not directly labeled by Rhaïs as such, seems to be more the human emotion of nostalgia than desire to return to religious practice. The Fassinas are living relics of the old ways, but they remain at a distance, geographical[44] and spiritual, from the rest of the family. Mister Saffar misses the customs that, in his family, died with his parents. The memories of the festival table are strong as are the feelings of family gathering to celebrate. The diminishing of religious practice has meant the diminishing of family unity and joy, and there remains a vacuum, a vacuum that is a source of tension and sadness. One can assume that these tensions in the Saffar family, the disappointment with "civilized" ways and their disregard for the joys of having a vibrant family life, represent the real tensions for Algerian Jews who had both feet planted in the modern world, while in their hearts, they yearned for the goodness they remembered in the "ancient" ways.

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[44] They live in Saint-Eugène which is a day's journey away.

The "ancient" ways, however, lead to the final tragedy of *Les Juifs*. When Jacob, living in Paris, learns of Debourah's marriage to Edmond, he suffers a breakdown and gives up his dream of becoming ordained by the Rothschild Seminary. Ashamed and heartbroken, he returns to Algeria where his parents have arranged marriages for him and for his sisters with their neighbors' children. Jacob's marriage to Victorine was the leverage, in place of significant dowries, that permitted the transaction to go forward. Jacob reluctantly accepts and marries Victorine, whom he cannot bring himself to love because she is not Debourah. In the meantime, Debourah and Jacob each secretly love the other, though neither ever acts on the feeling. The closest they come is when they find themselves secluded together in an enclosed room. Rabbi Éléazar has taken in his favored student and made him a teacher in his *Beit Midrash*. One day, when Debourah brings her son, whom she has named Éléazar for her father, to be blessed by his grandfather, Jacob is overcome by the need to talk to her. Before he catches up to her, being in the *Beit Midrash* causes old feelings to stir inside of her, feelings that frighten her.

> "Oh! What she was doing there was a crime. To still be interested in a man other than her husband... To forget at once her motherly and her marital obligations because of an old love. Jacob was nothing more than a stranger now. Did she not, on the eve of her wedding, vow to banish him from her memory?... And to be there alone, face to face with his image, in that darkened room, where everything spoke of him, could be adulterous." (p. 203)

Before she can find the Rabbi, Jacob discovers her, and they are face to face. Jacob confesses the feelings burning inside of him.

> "He is forcing me to marry Victorine!... when I... I love only you!"

They do not act on their feelings, but the impropriety of their encounter vis-à-vis Jewish laws of modesty sets the tone for later events.

> "A married woman must not be face to face with a man, not even her brother... unless they have the sky as their witness." (p. 207)

The rabbi discovers them talking to each other, and fearful of his reprimand, Debourah runs to a window and opens it to allow the sky to be their witness. But the sinful act of being secluded, even without physical contact, has been committed. And because of this seclusion, an important precept of the Torah is recalled, a precept that casts a pall over the rest of the novel.

> "The sins of the parents are revisited upon the children." (p. 203, 207)

Eight years later, because of his awareness of his "sin," Jacob is relieved not to have children of his own since he would have to worry for their well-being.[45] In the meantime, little Éléazar has become Jacob's student at the *Beit Midrash*. The child, to the delight of his grandfather, his mother, and his teacher, becomes a Talmud prodigy, able to read and memorize Hebrew texts with ease. In addition to being a prodigy, he also exhibits deep sensitivity and compassion for others. He even agrees to share his Communion (*Bar-Mitzvah*) celebration with other children whose parents cannot afford to have one. Jacob takes great pride in his student and even imagines that Éléazar is his own child, which he would be had fate not separated him from Debourah. As the boy chants the "commentaries on the Torah," he represents a bridge between generations and customs, the old and the young, the traditional and the assimilated. As he chants about the

[45] Just the same, he will be excited when Victorine does become pregnant. He still expresses worry because of the sin, but his excitement is a sign of the importance of continuing the family lines, particularly, as he would hope through male descendants.

fundamental laws of Torah, "the oneness and eternity of God,... the necessity and the beauty of the Sabbath, love of family, the horrors of theft, of murder, and of bearing false witness, the strict laws of Torah in this child's mouth took on a force and a feeling that made even the most religious person tremble." (p. 242) Then he recounts the final commandment of his discourse. It is the prohibition against coveting your neighbor's wife.

> "Turn your eyes away from her to ignore her beauty. If she provokes you, turn away from her, spit on the ground with disdain. Because she will lead you to your doom. Sons of Israel, this crime is impardonnable, and the sin of the parents is revisited upon the children." (p. 242)

With the innocence of the child, and ignorant, as was most of the world, of his mother's and his teacher's private longing for each other, little Éléazar did not know that the precept that he taught had sealed his own fate before he was born. His fate wastes no time as it arrives later that day.

During the celebration of his Communion in the garden of Rabbi Éléazar's home, little Éléazar spies from a distance Victorine, the wife of his beloved teacher. She has at long last become pregnant, and upon seeing her, Éléazar recalls a lesson that his grandfather had taught him. Like his teacher Jacob, he interprets it in a way that compels him to noble action with tragic results.

> "Carrying your bread from the oven, do not pass the door of a pregnant woman without entering and sharing a portion with her... At the table, you do not take the first bite without having her taste some of your food... You will let her smell the

flower you have just picked... And you will have performed the greatest of *mitzvahs*." (p. 262)

To prove that he has learned the precepts of the Torah, Éléazar decides that he must go out of his way to do something special for the pregnant wife of his teacher. He determines the deed must be to pick for her the finest bunch of grapes he can find. He sees such grapes dangling from a vine high above the garden. In order to get to them, he has to crawl onto a wooden, worm-eaten plank. As he reaches for the grapes, the wood snaps beneath him, and Éléazar falls to his death. As the stunned partygoers gather around him, his shattered body holds out the grapes and gasps his last words—words which prove how affected he is by his religious teachings.

"Tell Grandpa... that I learned the lesson well." (p. 264)

In *Les Juifs*, there is no character identifiable as an antagonist. Every character is basically a good person who has the best interests of others at heart, and at no point does anyone commit a malicious act or plot against another. There are two conflicting forces at play—assimilation and tradition, and the clash between them sets up the tragedy. Though Rhaïs is as critical of the ignorance of the highly assimilated as she is of those bound to their religion, it is ultimately the Jewish tradition, and not modernity, that creates the tragedies. God and religion are cast as the true villains of the story, and the rabbis along with those who aspire to be rabbis are the central figures who represent the villains. They perpetuate a system in which Jacob and Debourah could not be together, and are advocates for the rules that cause an innocent child to suffer. There is also here a condemnation to those who, blinded by religious faith, truly believe the boy's death to be a direct act of God rather than a horrible accident. This tension in the perceptions of the

final tragedy is indicative of the environment in which this story was created—the clash of French rationalism with the religious superstitions of the traditional Algerian Jewish community. Even if one, as a rationalist, were to deny the role of divine retribution in the novel, the more direct source of all sadness for its characters is a zealous pursuit of Jewish learning and observance of the Law.

In Morocco, where the first Alliance school had been established, the French-language literature also took on critical tone regarding the stringency of Jewish religion and customs. The novel *Mazaltob* by Blanche Bendahan stands apart from *Ninette* and *Les Juifs* by representing a wide spectrum of characters with varied responses to modernity. The characters with their responses come into conflict, and through those conflicts, the author gives the reader a sense of the tensions experienced in a community in transition. She succinctly expresses the moral of this story in the third quarter of the novel;

> "One cannot shed the habits of childhood, his place, and this devout imitation which he does more by reflex than with intent." (p. 140)

Mazaltob, despite the beliefs that she develops through intellectual reasoning, will tragically never be able to break free because of the customs forced upon her by circumstance of the time and place of her birth. Strict interpretations and observance of religion interfere with a person's free will and desires of the heart.

In contrast with the two other stories discussed so far, the rabbis are not significant vehicles in expressing the author's attitude toward religion. A rabbinic presence is however felt. They are treated in similar fashion to their treatment in *Ninette* and *Les Juifs*, and in *Mazaltob* they represent one end of the spectrum of the Moroccan

Jewish community, those least affected by French culture. Among the rabbis who do appear, there is the rabbi who officiates at the title character Mazaltob's ill-fated wedding. The rabbi is described in stereotypical fashion, as an "old man[46]" with a "long, white beard." (p. 63) Rabbinic imagery is further detailed in a post-wedding meal offered to the rabbis. Without describing the men themselves, a specific attitude toward them is portrayed in the description of the meal—"a sad dinner, stern and icy." (p. 64) In these terms, the rabbis and tradition are depicted as old, emotionless, and uncaring.

An attitude toward the rabbis, different from that in *Ninette* and *Les Juifs*, is better reflected in an earlier passage. This attitude is presented in relation to modern thought and techonology, specifically modern medicine which is equated to the wisdom of rabbinic sages. Dr. Bralakoff, originally from Russia, stands on an opposite end of the spectrum. He is a man of science and is Jewish by identity more than practice. He lives among the Jews of Tetouan, and is a welcome presence despite his Ashkenazi roots which are tolerated because of the care he provides for his Sephardi co-religionists. In the voice of the narrator, Bendahan raises this rhetorical question:

> "But is he not as *chacham* [wise] as Rebbi Isaac Nahon and Rebbi Isaac Bengualid whose tombs are so greatly honored?" (p. 16)

There is acknowledgment of rabbinic wisdom, but the sainted rabbis who are mentioned are dead and gone. Meanwhile, a man of science from the distant occidental world is revered just as much as the rabbinic sages. By equating the scientific wisdom of Dr. Bralakoff with rabbinic Judaism, *Mazaltob* promotes modern ways over the old-- the entrenched rules of the traditional society that loom over the lives of the characters and shape their fates. Dr. Bralakoff's attitudes toward religion and subsequent superstitions

[46] *vieillard*

come through in his interactions with patients. Madam Massiah who has become exceedingly weak from the number of times she has given birth, is advised by Dr. Bralakoff that any future pregnancies could be a threat to her life. She is right alongside the rabbis on the highly conservative end of the spectrum of characters. The narrator describes her this way.

> "...like most Jewish women, she never sought the reason why behind many of the religious obligations. She knows only one thing: one must do what has always been done from generation to generation[47]." (p.71)

Thus she responds to the doctor's advice in kind.

> "Doctor, it will be according to God's will." (p. 73)

Not surprised but always dismayed by the ignorance that surrounds him, Dr. Bralakoff expresses his frustration directly to Madame Massiah.

> "I was certain of that response. Ah! These darned ladies of Tetouan! All the same!" (p.73)

The young girl Mazaltob is a product of the Alliance school in Tetouan. Despite her access to education, she still remains bound to the traditional role the Jewish community enforces upon women. She stands in the middle of the spectrum, a pawn, trapped between competing influences, family heritage and enlightened education. Despite being firmly rooted in her community, she has access to the outside world, and many people reach out to her. These friends sense in Mazaltob potential for great success in life and love if she could just free herself from the strict religious society. One such person who seeks to help Mazaltob is Madam Gérard, the wife of the French consul. In a chance meeting, she discovers that Mazaltob has a "delicious" voice and decides to offer

[47] "generation to generation" literally "*de père en fils* (from father to son)"

her singing lessons. In her lessons, Mazaltob is exposed to opera, secular music, a genre to which the inhabitants of *La Judéria* (the Jewish quarter) take exception.

> "As if there were not Castillian songs brought by the Jewish-Spanish ancestors: '*La ciudad de Toledo*[48]' and '*La reina chérifa mora*[49]?' Are there not also the gay *piyutim*[50] for marriage?" (p. 23)

The choice of music is derided by the community, and Madame Gérard's lessons are regarded as scandalous, partially for their appeal to Western, "cultured" tastes. They are a deviation from acceptable normative behavior since, in the community's mind, a young girl should be preparing to become a wife, learning to do things like cook and maintain a household. The European's special interest in a little Jewish girl, teaching her "foreign" music, is mocked in *La Judéria*. Rather than being proud of something for which she has shown a natural proclivity, Mazaltob returns each time from Madame Gérard's amid the scorn of her gossiping neighbors. She is forced into being ashamed, "scarlet-faced with her shoulders hunched." (p.24)

The educated and cultured Mazaltob is forced, at the age of sixteen, into her traditional role in the community of *La Judéria*. Her father arranges for her to marry José Jalfon, a wealthy Argentinian who has come to visit relatives in Tetouan. Having lost his family fortune, Mazaltob's father David sees this as an opportunity to improve his family's lot, particularly that of Mazaltob, for not many people would want to marry into a family with little money. The critique of this practice in the eyes of French culture is voiced through Madame Gérard who questions the marriage.

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[48] The City of Toledo
[49] The Cherifian Moorish Queen
[50] Liturgical Hebrew (or combinations of Hebrew with romance languages) poems written for particular occasions

"You are so young, my lovely Mazaltob... But what does your little heart say?" (p.51)

Of course Madame Gérard knows as well as Mazaltob that, in her world, it matters not what her heart says, but rather what her father says. The marrying of young girls was one of the main societal norms the Alliance sought to eliminate. As in *Les Juifs*, this practice is exposed, but here in *Mazaltob* the attack on the custom is more direct. It is voiced by the narrator and other characters, and it is more condemning as it describes Mazaltob's emotional trauma after her first conjugal encounter.

"...on her sullen face, her gaze is so distant that no one...dares allude to the night that was discharged[51]." (p. 69)

José represents another world, the mysterious Americas which lie across the sea. In his union with Mazaltob and the Massiah family, these two worlds collide violently with each side trying to convince the other to honor its ways. Mazaltob is the innocent, compliant victim trapped in the middle. In the character of Jose there is a critique of the highly assimilated Jews who, in their loss of faith, have lost respect for traditions and the moral values that come with them. He does not understand the local religious and folk customs surrounding marriage, but attempts to subvert them. The Massiah family fights him off, protecting the sanctity of the eight day separation between husband and wife after their nuptials. In the end, Salomon makes an impassioned plea citing, such elements of Jewish law as essential to hygiene which enabled the people's survival for so many years. Just like *kashrut* and handwashing before meals, this ritual and strict adherence to

[51] The French *écoulée* serves a double meaning, "occurred" and "discharged, as in bodily fluids." It seems Bendahan intended to allude directly to the sexual encounter of the previous night.

it have been essential to the continuity of Jews across the generations. Additionally, it is strict adherence to a common set of laws that unites Diaspora Jews wherever they end up.

> "Interpretation—overly strict, I agree—of the letter and not of the spirit, is what gives the Jews, these nationless people despite themselves, a semblance of nationality." (p. 77)

At the end of the debate, José remains unmoved and unconvinced.

> "You will not convince me, Salomon... Plenty of Jews are free thinkers. And I know only this one thing: all of that is unworthy of our time[52]." (p. 77)

José is exposed as a hypocrite. He favors tradition when it suits his desires, like satisfying his lust for Mazaltob, but when it forces him to keep his libido in check or inconveniences him in any way, he deems tradition to be worthless. He serves as a symbol of extreme rejection of Jewish customs. Bendahan does not view this type of person favorably and he is presented as an unlikable character, caring only for his own interests. It is not surprising therefore that, when he realizes that his wife will never change and does not want to leave her family behind, he returns to Buenos Aires, abandoning his wife Mazaltob forever. If there is any identifiable villain in this story, it is José for the way in which he renders Mazaltob an *agunah*, a kept woman according to Jewish law, bound to an absentee husband who has not offered her the courtesy of a divorce. Just the same, as in *Les Juifs* there is always the larger villain in the story, the traditions and strict interpretations of religious law that create these tragic situations.

The character of Uncle Salomon, so instrumental in the Massiah family's dealings with José, stands in a particular place along a spectrum of reactions to Jewish tradition in

[52] "Time" here seems to serve a double meaning-- time in the sense of how one spends a day as well as time in the sense of the modern era.

the modern world. Unlike David Massiah, Mazaltob's father, who strictly maintains the ancient ways without a second thought, and unlike José Jalfon who has assimilated to the point where his Jewishness is hardly recognizeable, Uncle Salomon has chosen to maintain the traditions even after experiencing the outside world. He is well-traveled and very learned. He has even adopted Western attitudes absorbed during his world travels. He has ultimately chosen however to return to his native home, *La Judéria* of Tetouan, to live out his final days. The draw of the familiar and the comforts of home are too strong for him to resist. Just the same, he approaches his observance of the familiar customs with an enlightened way of thinking. He has developed his own philosophy regarding God's relationship to the world.

> "I do not approve... of the respect for so many precepts, the respect that makes God out to be some sort of bogeyman on horseback protecting principles and always ready to give punishments." (p. 75)

This God-concept that he rejects is too concerned with seeming trivia, and not with morality. It has helped the survival of the people, as he tried to convince José, since the fear of divine retribution can be more persuasive than medical advice. Though he supports strict adherence to the laws for this reason, Salomon ultimately believes that each person can develop his own relationship with God.

> "And God, He is like a book: each person understands Him according to his personality." (p. 76)

He further describes his theology in a later conversation with Dr. Bralakoff and David Massiah. They are talking about the approaching Tish B'av[53] holiday and a popular custom of buying pieces of pottery for children to play with under the assumption that

[53] Ninth of Av, a Jewish day of national mourning for the destruction of the Temple

they will break the pottery and will then cry, as children do, over their broken toys. The purpose for this is to have as much lamenting as possible expressed in the days leading up to the mournful holiday. Salomon, in his rational way of thinking, finds this absurd.

> "... I believe that God is wiser than that... and that he does not confuse the cries of a child who breaks a toy with those of a pious man who mourns the destruction of the Temple." (p. 89)

He promotes the idea that quality of prayer and expressions of lamentation are more important than sheer quantity—that one's intent is more important than the actions themselves. At one time his beliefs would probably have been considered heretical, but in the time of the novel, the turn of the century in Morocco, he is a bridge between generations. In his attempt to bring traditional Judaism up to date with the Age of Reason, he represents the Wissenschaft tradition, studying all subjects, even Judaism, in a systematic, scientific way which was at the heart of the Alliance philosophy of which Bendahan was a product.

The character of Mazaltob, having been educated by the *Alliance*, is a liberal thinker trapped in a world requiring strict observance. She envies the heroines of the romantic stories she has read.

> "These woman— these little girls-- have the right to savor their beautiful youth and, before loving a child, to love being in love." (p. 93)

She has opportunities to rebel against her upbringing and live out the fantasies that she has read and dreamed about. One person who tries to influence her rebellion is Léa, the daughter-in-law of Dr. Bralakoff. The narrator frequently refers to Léa as "*l'Alsacienne* (the woman from Alsace)," a name which not only accentuates her French nationality,

but which also emphasizes her Ashkenazi roots). Her husband Serge has come to Tetouan to take his father's place as the community physician in *La Judéria*. Léa sees Mazaltob as the closest thing she has to a peer in *La Judéria* because she speaks French, has an interest in the same literature, has an open mind toward the rest of the world, and loves the music of French culture. Like Madame Gérard she tries to foster Mazaltob's love for music, which offers her a form of escape. For Mazaltob, Léa represents everything that she secretly wants to be, in a marriage founded on love, dressing in modern fashions, and knowing firsthand the landscapes of Europe so romanticized in her reading.

Léa does what she can to integrate her friend into the Western world, even inviting her to go with her on holiday in Gibraltar when Serge, the ever-faithful doctor, must stay behind and tend to his patients. Gibraltar, though not exactly the Continent, still represents for Mazaltob the world about which she has read so much. It is Europe, the land of reason, of liberty, of poetry, of romance—those things she so admires. Going to Europe, especially to a Spanish territory, represents a sort of homecoming as well. Spain is the "repository of the bones of her ancestors" (p. 169), a place which recalls both greatness and sadness. It is the land the Golden Age of Judah Halevi and Shmuel Hanagid, and it is also a land of the persecutions, of Torquemada, and the expulsion. Four hundred years might have passed, but the memories of the place evidently still stir strong mixed feelings in the collective conscious of the Moroccan Jews. Gibraltar though, as the narrator points out, is "almost African," so as a hybrid bridging the gap between Africa and Europe, it allows Mazaltob to have a taste of Europe, to get her toes wet without completely immersing herself. This gradual introduction will be important because Mazaltob will never be able to make a complete break from her familiar life, her family,

and the ancient Jewish customs engrained in her more deeply than the values of French Enlightenment.

In Gibraltar, Mazaltob experiences a transformation.

"She cast aside the 'woman of Tetouan' that she always has to be...the other Mazaltob took over for good—the Mazaltob of the French culture of the Alliance school, the Mazaltob who, with Madame Gérard, sang opera melodies..." (p. 169)

She seems to be completely liberated, ready to leave behind her old life, including her marriage to José. However, she quickly realizes that she is not entirely comfortable with her new self. Walking through the shopping district of town, she and Léa attract a great deal of attention from the local Spaniards, who do everything they can to catch the eye of these beautiful women. Having grown up with the Jewish value of modesty engrained in her, and because she is technically a married woman, Mazaltob is uneasy receiving this type of attention. Meanwhile, underscoring a fundamental difference between the two friends, Léa is flattered and seems to enjoy the flirtation. Though they share much in common in their worldviews and marital status, Léa's enjoyment of life is not restricted by the inhibitions of a strict religious upbringing.

The holiday in Gibraltar proves to be a significant turning point in the life of Mazaltob and in the novel's storyline. Dr. Bralakoff's adopted son Jean comes to visit the two women during their vacation. If Madame Massiah stands at one end of the spectrum, and Uncle Salomon in the middle, Jean stands at the complete opposite side. He is the product of a mixed marriage between a cousin of Dr. Bralakof and a Christian Frenchman. Dr. Bralakoff had taken in his nephew after his parents were murdered in Russia during a *pogrom*. Though he was raised alongside Serge in the Bralakoff home, he has never

become Jewish, remaining uncircumcised and ambivalent toward his family's religion. This is a constant source chagrin for Mazaltob who, through her lifelong friendship with Jean, has developed strong romantic feelings toward him. When they are young, long before the trip to Gibraltar, she tries to convince him of the beauty of Judaism, but his father has encouraged him to wait until he turns twenty-one to choose a faith.

> "Oh! You will without a doubt not hesitate!... Is our religion not the most beautiful?" (p. 28)

Mazaltob is surpised when Jean answers that he finds no religion appealing. She may have reached the age of maturity at which she can marry, but she still sees the world with the naiveté of a thirteen-year-old girl. She has difficulty believing that he, or anyone could not be proud of being Jewish, so she appeals to him on a personal, emotional level.

> "And what if I asked you, myself, to try to believe in the God of Abraham, to finally be one of us, would you not agree?... I would be oh so happy! So happy to do a mitzvah!..." (p. 28)

Having experienced in his life the worst that can happen when religions clash, through the alienation of his intermarried parents and through the *pogrom* that killed them, he cannot bring himself to embrace any religion. Having departed for Europe several years before, at the age of eighteen, to complete his schooling, Jean returns as an adult, a trained musician[54], to be with his family and to see Mazaltob. He is more idealistic than ever.

> "...because I do not want a God entirely constructed, because I methodically created Him in my brain and in my heart, because He is a cosmic God who

[54] Music appears to be a recurring motif symbolizing. The type of music, its origins, as well as where it is studied are important points in contrasting French and Western culture with maghrebi culture.

juggles the nebulas and the suns, because He does not grant the Earth – this worthless bunch of mud—more importance than it deserves, because he is looming over vengeance and hatred, I will walk alone among men, exiled perhaps from love..." (p. 163)

Saddened when he learns that Mazaltob has been married during his absence, he senses a glimmer of hope in her abandonment. However, he is aware that his denial of religion threatens to keep them apart, as long as she remains in Tetouan.

The trip to Gibraltar presents him with an opportunity to be alone with her, far away from family and community pressures. He comes to Gibraltar with his traveling companion Charles Balder, to join Léa and Mazaltob in their rented Villa. There, Jean confesses his love and eventually breaks through Mazaltob's defenses so that she admits that all her life, she has secretly loved him too. Yet she is forced to reject him, not because of religion, or his mixed ancestry that includes persecutors of Jews, or even that he has no Sephardi lineage. She tells him, "You love God in your way. And... loving him is enough." (p. 182) This is quite a departure for Mazaltob to think this way. She has been primed to believe in the equality of all men because of her education, but she has lived her entire life exclusively in a Jewish community that cannot fully trust or embrace other peoples. Bendahan underscores this point, that it is not religious difference that stifles potential romance. She sets this up with a discourse by Charles Balder, an enlightened practicing Catholic, and a fervent Judeophile. He, like Uncle Salomon, stands in the middle of the spectrum of reactions to religion, finding the balance between reason and religion from a Christian perspective. (This is no doubt why he and Uncle Salomon get

along so well later in the novel.) Charles equates the goodness and rightness of all religions, especially Christianity and Judaism.

> "Is the Bible not the basis of both religions? The commandments that one reads in the Christian catechisms are the same ones that Moses inscribed on the tablets of the Law..." (p. 178)

Charles represents a rapprochement between Christians and Jews, an internal reconciliation that Jean badly needs in his life as well as a reconciliation that must occur for Jean and Mazaltob to be together. However, despite her open-mindedness, and the new Mazaltob that she has become, she confesses that she cannot bring herself to reject fully who she is.

> "Just because [my husband] has forgotten his obligations does not mean that I have to forget mine! I believe that only the death of the two spouses releases a couple united under the benediction of *Adonai*... Alas! There is always inside of me a 'woman of Tetouan' that nothing can kill." (p. 184)

The "woman of Tetouan," as defined by Bendahan, marries only once, and knows "in the biblical sense" only one man in her life. Even for a widow or a divorcée, there is a stigma associated with a woman who remarries. This is why she decides to ignore Léa's urging to track down José in Argentina and request a *get*[55]. The local custom is for a woman to marry only once, and as she has said, she will always be a "woman of Tetouan." Thus she asks Jean to leave and never again to reenter her life.

[55] A Jewish bill of divorcement that according to Jewish law must be granted by the husband in a written document presented to the wife.

Upon her return to *La Juderia*, Mazaltob feels that the self that was born in Gibraltar has died, and she will forever be the "woman of Tetouan." She however begins to reread the Old Testament through new eyes, and she begins to see God in a new light.

> "A new God replaced Him, slowly, each day gaining ground that the other lost; another God less concerned with vengeance and battles than with causing the silent fanfare of the sun to burst forth: a poetic God who distributes to every drop of dew the infinitesimal day that made it gleam. A great God. A God full of logic since, having created men—white, black, yellow, red--, he loves them all equally... Unless he does not want to grant the planet—this piece of mud lost in space—more importance than it deserves... It is a cosmic God who juggles the nebulas and the stars... It is the God of Jean." (p. 189)

She has begun to see God in the same way as Jean, and based on reading the same scriptures that she had read many years before. She understands her Judaism differently in a way that unites all people. She rejects the God of her childhood and wonders if she erred by expelling Jean from her life. Not long after Mazaltob has this realization, she has a chance meeting with a relative of her husband José who has come from Argentina to visit family. He tells her that José has remarried and started a family. The injustice of this overwhelms Mazaltob, and she becomes resolute, for the first time to take her life into her own hands. She sends a message through Charles Balder for her love to come back so that they can run away, to live together, in the land of her fantasies, in France. Mazaltob knows that they could never live openly together in Tetouan, as she would be viewed as a woman of ill-repute for living with a man not married to her under the blessing of God. They will have to go away, and her family would be so shamed that she could never

return. Jean eagerly comes back to Tetouan, and arranges passage for both of them to go to Paris to be married in civil courts ignorant of the fact that, according to Judaism, she could not be permitted to Jean. Mazaltob leaves her house in the dark of night and runs to Jean. They embrace, and she feels the impending fulfillment of her romantic dreams. Then, imitating the tragedy of Lot's wife, she looks back toward her home, and in her mind, the city speaks to her.

"*La Judéria* has a hold on you: you will not leave it." (p. 233)

She breaks away form Jean and runs back to her home.

Soon after this broken tryst, Mazaltob receives a letter that Jean has written on his deathbed. The medical causes of his illness are never fully described, and it seems apparent that the author wants the reader to think that Jean dies of a broken heart. Though not Jewish, he has made arrangements to be buried in the Jewish cememtery so that, in eternity, he could be closer to Mazaltob. Soon after, Mazaltob herself, after spending too much time in the sun, falls ill and herself is close to death. She knows that in death, "nothing separated her from Jean... not even her God." (245) She dies after a short life, wasted in misery. Bendahan has presented her as beautiful, passionate, educated, liberal woman, who was kept from pursuing a life chosen on her own.

"Living one's life? These words are never spoken in La Judéria." (p. 208)

For that, the blame lies in superstitious customs rooted in religion, and ultimately, the blame for the tragedy, lies with God.

Blaming God as the identifiable figurehead for religion is an undercurrent in all three stories examined in this chapter. Each one delivers a sharp critique of strict Jewish observance. For authors who are products of a movement intended to liberate Jews, they

treat Judaism harshly. The French Jews who taught and influenced these writers had a head start on knowing what it meant to be emancipated Jews in a secular world. They therefore had already reconciled what their Jewish identities meant. The communities to which they came had not known emancipation, and when their minds were liberated and when the French presence guaranteed greater social freedoms to the Jews of North Africa, Jews of the *Maghreb* were also absorbing their religious attitudes—attitudes that had developed in the West in a different cultural milieu. Superimposed onto the Maghreb where religious attitudes in response to emancipation had not developed naturally, the Western response advanced by the *Alliance* and its French ambassadors made the break from tradition more difficult. These writers generally accepted the philosophy and attitudes of their teachers, but resistance from the older generation was strong, and this fed the harsh critiques of religion in the literature. The unity of the Jewish people was important for them, but it was also important to make their lives consistent with science and reason. The older ways from which they wanted to make a clean break, as is evident in the three novels examined in this chapter, were considered impediments to this type of enlightened life.

Even though the enlightened life was what the liberated Jews were seeking, the literature also showed a disdain for those whose assimilation had taken them so far that they their lives seemed shallow and superficial. There was something missing in the lives of those Jews who rejected their heritage to the point that they merely called themselves Jews without supporting their ancestral ties with any true knowledge or practice. This disembodied Judaism is effectively portrayed in two key episodes in *Les Juifs*. One occurs at the wedding reception for Debourah and Edmond where there is a clash of the

bourgeois and the traditional Jews in their old world clothes. Rabbi Éléazar's family and friends, dressed in traditional Jewish garb, are ushered into a sideroom separate from the rest of the party. Hearing the hustle and bustle of the party and able to catch a glimpse of the ornately decorated room, they wonder about their special treatment.

> "Why do they not receive us in the big room with everybody else? Do we steal? Do we offend? Why this cruelty?"

The elder servant of the Saffar family Miriem reluctantly divulges the real reason for their isolation.

> "It is because you are dressed like Jews."

The response of the guests highlights the hypocrisy in the pretense of this wealthy Jewish family putting on airs, trying to impress the Algerian upper-class.

> "We are Jews. That is clear. So, what is the problem ? You think that they, the Saffar family, others do not know that they are Jews? They know it, don't you worry. Being Jewish cannot be hidden, even if it was concealed in the belly of a fish!" (p. 158)

Assimilation had brought the Saffar family to the point that they were embarassed of their Jewish roots, and as the isolated wedding guest knew, being Jewish is more than just a costume or outer appearance. With the fear of being associated with what outsiders perceive as true Jewishness, they ignore basic values kindness and unity of the Jewish people as they cruelly treat some of their wedding guests, their own co-religionists.

The second instance highlighting problems of extreme assimilation centers around Jacob's celebration of Passover during his studies in Paris. He is invited to spend the holiday in the home of a wealthy Jewish family of Algerian origin. Though they do honor

the tradition by hosting a *seder*, Jacob knows from the beginning that they have no true love for the custom. What remains of their tie to tradition compels them to observe the annual occasion with the assistance of a rabbinical student who is necessary since they no longer know how to conduct the rituals. They ask Jacob to begin before all the guests have arrived since they find the service to be "a bit long" (p. 79). When he obliges, the *seder* guests proceed to talk amongst themselves while Jacob reads aloud from the Haggadah. The ancient words with the ancient melodies are nothing more to them than flavors adding to the taste and aroma of the festival meal. Jacob, who gives voice to those words, is like another item on the *seder* plate, a ritual food whose meaning calls out for explanation. He becomes the *paschal* lamb, embodying the ritual on behalf of the other guests. His presence makes them feel as though they have fulfilled their obligation. Jacob feels resentment toward these Jews who welcome him as a stranger into their home but continue to treat him as a stranger, an oddity, a ritual object they only have to see once a year. He longs for the Passover meals spent with Rabbi Éléazar and Debourah who felt deep attachments to the custom and cherished the joyous celebration of redemption. In Paris, Jacob feels as though the actual Passover ritual is being mocked if not ignored, and he is saddened by this emerging form of Judaism. The final blow at this *seder* is delivered when he concludes the service with the customary, "Next year in Jerusalem." The children at the table respond by crying out, "In Paris. In Paris for always" (p. 80). They reject not only observance but the attachment to Zion which is supposed to link Jews in all places. For them Paris is the new Zion, an idea not uncommon for Jews enjoying the fruits of emancipated life. This has also been true in the American Jewish experience

which has seen Jews treat their home as a promised land. What is left of this family's Judaism is the outer casing—a shell containing no substance.

As much as Rhaïs and the other North African Jews writing in French wanted to be a part of the French culture, they did not like the end result they foresaw as Jews became integrated into the secular French culture as they cast negative light on the flipside of the overly observant, traditional Jews whom they equally rejected. Theirs was a generation bridging the gap, in their respective locales, between the old ways and the new. Looking at both horizons, the tensions they felt were strong as were their literary treatments of those horizons.

Chapter 3:

Women's Voices Emerging in Judeo-Maghrebi Literature

In the Maghreb, where the influences of French colonization brought about rapid changes, no group went untouched by Western ideals. This was true in the response of North African communities to changing views of religion in the enlightened world, a response that touched Muslims as well as Jews. The increased laxity in observance in favor of a more cultural type of Judaism, along with an increasingly negative view of traditional religion espoused by agents and products of the French educational systems, whether government sponsored or Alliance governed, has already been described in the previous chapter. These changes had a profound effect not only on the larger communities, but more specifically on the smaller subsets of those communities. Clergy roles were changing, business opportunities were in a state of flux, and family roles were transformed as children's education began to take precedence over beginning work at a young age.

The Emancipation ideology of the French colonizers, coupled with the Alliace's initiative of "*Salut par l'École* (Salvation through education)," led to the democratization of educational opportunities, not just for the most promising Talmud scholars among the boys, but for all children—boys and girls alike. Education included secular topics, often at the expense of religion, in order to facilitate the Jews' full integration into the French colony or protectorate where they lived. Educating girls in this secularized environment helped to liberate women from the rigidly defined roles of their traditional communities. Of particular interest to the colonizers was eliminating a practice that offended their modern sensibilities-- marrying off young girls. Education for girls, having them in

schools instead of nuptial chambers, was a way of protecting them and ultimately encouraging them to break the bindings kept them in their traditional roles as homemakers and mothers. Albert Bensoussan, in his study of the image of women in Judéo-Maghrebi literature, describes the traditional roles.

> "A woman in the *Maghreb*, no matter her religion, her tradition, has one possible destiny: marriage which leads to her being enclosed in the home, being a silent procreator who does not exist unless she gives birth to a male descendant."[56]

The young girls who avoided this fate and received unprecedented educational opportunities, grew into enlightened women in the Western mold. The changing attitude toward women, and their changing roles made the impact on them perhaps the greatest and most controversial of any subgroup. The change however was not easy.

The struggles inherent in the type of rapid change experienced by Maghrebi Jewish women, their search for identity and the resistance it encountered from the older power structures, are widely represented in the literature of the period. These are largely stories written during the interwar that reflect upon the time of transition. The tone of these stories includes a social critique of the treatment of women in the traditional society while praising, sometimes directly, Western culture for its enlightened attitude. In the critiques and praises that came from the pens of both men and women, certain recurring themes can be seen.

A theme that appears frequently in these stories is the disadvantage associated with being born a girl and of even having a girl in the family. As Bensoussan wrote, the primary job of a woman was to have children, and so news of a pregnancy was

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[56] Bensoussan, Albert. *"L'Image de la Femme Judéo-Maghrebine à travers l'Oeuvre d'Élissa Rhais, Blanche Bendahan, Irma Ychou."* Plurial : La Femme Dans la Société Francophone Traditionelle. 1987. 33.

congratulated with wishes that the child be a boy. The arrival of a girl was met with disappointment in the family, particularly by the father. In a patriarchal society girls were undesirable and were seen as an economic drain, they were unable to work in a trade to earn money for the family, and the family would have to provide a dowry in order to see them married. A boy could work and even add to the wealth of the family with a negotiated marriage contract. The reality of this preference is clearly described in an autobiographical account of life in the *Mellah*[57] of Fès. Degracia (pseudonym for Gracia Cohen) wrote that the birth of a daughter was commonly greeted with the words: "It's nothing. It's a girl (p. 96)." This is in direct opposition to what she recounts as recited upon the birth of a boy: "Praised be God (p. 69)!" According to a Moroccan proverb, translated and relayed by Degracia, "Give a father a son to circumcise, he will sing, he will dance, he will go barefoot into the street even if he is rich (p.69)!" In her introduction to the book, Degracia's daughter, Colette Roumanoff, who is responsible for the publication of her mother's memoirs, muses on this disparity. Having met with her mother's former neighbor, a woman named Rebecca, she confirms that "It's nothing. It's a girl" was part of the common language. When describing a business transaction, a success was gleefully called a boy while a failure was called a girl[58]. That the birth of a girl in this culture became synonymous with failure speaks volumes about the community's bias regarding gender.

This attitude is represented by Ryvel (pseudonym for Raphael Lévy) in his short novel *L'enfant de l'Oukala*. Ryvel, who was a product of the *Alliance* education and of the *E.N.I.O.*, worked as a school director in Tunis. Deeply affected by the plight of his

[57] Jewish ghetto in Morocco
[58] Roumanoff, Colette. *"Introduction de Colette Roumanoff."* *Récit d'une Enfance Marocaine*. Degracia. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003. 96

fellow Jews living in the *haras*, the Jewish ghettoes of Tunisia, the *hara* and its inhabitants provide the subject matter for much of his work. In *L'enfant de l'Oukala*, a father's reaction to having a girl in the impoverished Jewish community of Tunisia plays out as both comical and ultimately tragic.

Khéilou is the only son in his family, and when he marries the beautiful Rouehla, he becomes convinced that she will give him a son "who would perpetuate his name (p. 37)." He becomes so obsessed that he begins wagering rounds of Arack, the regional liquor of choice, with friends and business associates. Highly amused by his obsession, they begin to tease Khéilou-- their method of denigration being insults to his masculinity.

"Just look at yourself, my poor man. You are just the type to father girls." (p. 38)[59]

Even Simah Frati, the community *chohet* (the ritual slaughterer of kosher meat) in the community joins in, claiming sacred Jewish texts as his source[60].

> "You will have a girl, Khéilou, because you are more taken with your wife than she is with you." (p. 38)

Needing to prove his *machismo*, he begins to rely on superstition to make his wish of having a boy come true. Khéilou, as is the custom among expectant families, is visited by *mohelim*[61] seeking to be retained by the family in the event that the wife gives birth to a boy. When a *mohel* promises that, without fail, everyone who retains him has a boy, Khéilou jumps at the opportunity to hire him, but this gives him an idea. As other

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[59] Traditional Jewish sources attribute the child's gender to the mother. The fact that Khéilou is being mocked as the source of the child's gender could be adding to the emasculation, blaming him for something usually blamed on women. It could also be an indicator of an awareness of the scientific fact that it is the man's gamete who determines a child's gender.

[60] The citation is unclear, but Ryvel says Simah Frati draws his conclusions "from the Gemara or some other sacred text."

[61] Rabbis who perform the *berit milah*, ritual circumcision of Jewish boys at eight days old.

mohelim come to visit making the same promise, even offering to cite names of such success stories, he retains them as well—regardless of age or shakiness of voice[62].

> "Could he resist such arguments? Could he disregard, in favor of only one, the respectable brotherhood of *mohelim* whose frequent visits added to his delusion? Moreover, who could stop him from letting them all come?... God willing that Rouehla and he might be granted long life-- their house would be filled with boys." (p. 40)

A neighbor, Kiki, who has been present for several of Khéilou's meetings with *mohélim*, is too amused by what he witnesses to keep it inside. He goes around the *hara* informing the interested neighbors of the "big news."

> "Khéilou is not expecting one son, or two, or three... It is an entire *minyan*, yes, ten people." (p. 41)

There is no suspense regarding the direction in which this story is heading. In fact the narrator has already, prior to this account, introduced the reader to the fact that the arrival of the daughter Zaïra "completely destroyed" the happiness of Khéilou and Rouehla (p. 37). Though Khéilou is embarrassed and in debt from the rounds of Arack he gambled on his child's gender, he is eventually convinced to accept his daughter as a "creature of God (p. 44)." After all, there is still hope for Rouehla to conceive again and this time to have a son. When Rouehla does become pregnant again, Khéilou resolves not to tempt fate and to accept what God gives him. Just the same he begins making plans for a son's name and that he will become a rabbi as a way of thanking God. His obsession begins anew and has a profound affect on Rouehla who unfortunately miscarries after four months. Not wanting again to be accused of not loving her husband, she pleads with

[62] One might imagine this also implies shakiness of hands as well.

the midwife to tell Khéilou that the stillborn baby was a boy, though in fact it was another girl. Though he grieves over the lost child, the lie brings him solace that he is not in fact the "type who only fathers girls (p. 47)." As a full participant in the mania surrounding the desired birth of a boy, Rouehla takes drastic measures. On the advice of her neighbor Maissa, the wife of the *chochet* Simah Frati, who has been blessed with three sons, she goes to visit Couca the sorceress. Maissa assures her that his visit will guarantee that "in nine months a healthy boy will water you with his *pipi* (p. 47)." Couca lives on *l'impasse des Djerbiens*, a street name which, as discussed in the previous chapter, connotes a link to old world customs. In this case, the old world customs are superstitions and magic. Couca tells Rouehla that the evil eye is not upon her and gives her an elixir to drink each night before bed.

There is a social critique in this scene in which Rouehla visits Couca the sorceress. Yael M. Even-Levy suggests in her doctoral dissertation that an "extreme attachment to superstition, potions, soothsayers, miracle workers, and other swindlers" is linked to the high rates of illiteracy among women in traditional society[63]. These practices are therefore considered primarily the domain of women.[64] Visiting the sorceress is thus a sign, not only of Rouehla's desperation, but also her lack of sophistication. She appears to represent a type which Ryvel wants to point out as a tragic example, even a warning, of what happens when women are left out of the educational system. They may meet a fate similar to Rouehla's who scrupulously follows the assigned regimen. When the elixir fails to work month after month, she falls deeper into despair as she becomes convinced

[63] Even-Levy, Yael M. The Poetics of Identity in Judeo-Maghrebi Poetry: The Poetry of Sadia Levy, Ryvel, and Blanche Bendahan. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, 1998. 18.

[64] In the meantime, Khéilou's superstition is no less illogical, but is a more acceptable route since it involves religious leaders. Religion is the domain of men while women have their parallel superstition in sorcery.

that this remedy, seemingly effective for others, does not work for her. In the meantime, her husband's frustration and anger increase over time, and he lashes out in angry tirades against his wife. Despondent and exhausted, Rouehla dies one night in her bed where she is discovered by her husband who, upon discovering her body, is frightened out of his drunken stupor. The cause of death is unclear—whether it is the elixir, residual effects from the miscarriage, or abuse, verbal or physical from Khéilou. Just the same, the community blames him and his obsession with having a son for Rouehla's death. The ultimate tragedy of *L'enfant* is born out of this series of events. Unable to raise the child on his own, Khéilou entrusts Zaira's care to Rabbi Feulla and his wife Camouna. He becomes a drunkard taking practically no interest in his daughter. She finds love and warmth in the home of the Rabbi, but in the end, she responds to her father's rejection by attempting to reconcile a relationship with him. The attempted reconciliation ends up leading to their tragic demise in an ironic twist which has the estranged father and daughter perish together. They suffer a shared and terrible fate—a fate determined by the tragedy of Zaira being born a girl.

The desire for male children and the rejection of girls evokes such strong emotions that it plays easily into comedy and tragedy, and as is evident in *L'enfant*, both can be evident in the same story. The frequency with which this theme appears in *Maghrebi* literature speaks to the power of the societal and economic pressures revolving around gender—pressures which are exacerbated by religious and superstitious notions. This theme is also present in *Les Juifs: ou la fille d'Éléazar*. As noble and wise as he is, the beloved Rabbi Éléazar also wishes for male progeny. Marrying a second wife after his first is unable to conceive, he attempts to continue the family line. Though his love for

Debourah is never in doubt the way that Khéilou's is for Zaira, he is disappointed with the arrival of a girl. He does however seek a silver lining in the next generation.

> "'I will be consoled,' the rabbi would say, 'when I bounce Debourah's sons on my knees.'" (p. 12)

Even in the French protectorates, despite the influence of Western education, attitudes were slow to change, and frustration among women grew over the injustices suffered from their lack of status. Among the first generations of Jewish girls in North Africa to become literate, many women found a voice, through the written word, to express this frustration. This newfound voice, driven by a purpose-filled message of protest, may partially explain the large number of women who can be counted among the writers of Judéo-Maghrebi literature of French expression. In addition to Elissah Rhaïs and Blanche Bendahan, numerous other women authors arose. Among them are names like Maximilienne Heller, Berthe Benichou-Aboulker, Daisy Sebag, Jeanne Benguigui, Rosalia Bentami, Nadia Goldman, and Gracia Cohen. None are as well known today as Rhaïs, due in no small part to the scandal that surrounds her life, a scandal which has been the subject of multiple studies, a tell-all biography written by the son of her nephew and supposed one-time lover, and even a television movie in France.

The scandal surrounding the life and work of Elissa Rhaïs plays out like a novel itself, with the type of mystery, intrigue, and high drama that she attempted to inject into her work. Rhaïs worked in a literary genre that dealt with issues of identity, in a place where the certain identities were becoming less distinct amid the expanding influence of colonialism. Every aspect of her identity-- woman, Jew, Arab, Algerian-- was present in her work, and every one of those aspects figures into the scandal that shrouds her legacy.

Just as her characters Jacob and Debourah are torn between following the right of self-determination and the duties imposed on them because of their status vis-à-vis higher human and divine powers, Rhaïs too was a pawn trapped between ambition for success and the societal structures that dictated limits for Jewish women coming from a French colonized Arab nation.

Every aspect of Rhaïs's identity, from her relation to her work (whether author or plagiarizer) to her religion and even to her true name have had doubts cast upon them. In 1982, Paul Tabet, the son of Rhaïs's one-time secretary Raoul, published a biographical account of his father's life. The book entitled ***Elissa Rhaïs***, was based on the ailing Raoul's word of mouth testimony, given sixteen years earlier to Paul, along with a suitcase of letters and manuscripts. The biography's proven inaccuracies call into question the veracity of any of the accusations or assertions it makes. Even Rhaïs's name was reported incorrectly. Tabet's account revealed Rhaïs's true name to be Leila Boumendil. While no one disputes the Elissa Rhaïs was a *nom de plume*, Dugas and other historical sources have identified her true name to be Rosine Boumendil.[65] Regardless of whether one source seems more credible than the other, a dispute over something as basic and fundamental to identity as a name is a sign that much more in that person's life will be called into question.

Tabet suggested that Leila was only of half-Jewish parentage, with a Muslim father and a Jewish mother. Intermarriage, though not uncommon in the changing face of the westernized Algerian community and a frequent subject for much of the later maghrebi literature, would have been a source of scandal affecting Leila's earliest years.

[65] In the following account, the name "Leila" will refer to Paul Tabet's account while the name "Rosine" will refer to the biographical information given by Guy Dugs.

Contrary to this presentation however, Guy Dugas, who specializes in marginal literatures from the African world and has been editing a collection of Judeo-Magrhebi literature, informs us that Rosine was in fact born to Jacob and Mazaltob Boumendil, a Jewish couple living in Blida. Dugas rejects much of the oral history which has tainted the reception of Rhaïs's writing as sensationalism with little to no anchoring in truth.

Tabet also claims that Leila never received any formal education and spent her entire life completely illiterate. Dugas categorically refutes this statement, but for Tabet, Leila's being illiterate figures heavily into the aspersions that make up his story. Both accounts of her life have the girl married very young, but the nature of this marriage and its history emphatically mark the split where the two histories diverge. Tabet tells us that Leila was married to a wealthy Arab merchant who subjugated the poor, young bride who refused to love him to the confines of his harem. The truth according to Dugas may not have been much happier, but it is without a doubt less sensational. He recounts that Rosine married a rabbi, Moïse Amar, with whom she had three children.

Rather than wait fifteen years for her husband to die, as Tabet suggests Leila did before leaving the "harem," Rosine divorced Moïse and remarried, to a wealthy businessman Maurice Chemoul (the altered version of his given name Mardochée Chemouil). Maurice provided his bride with a cottage known as the *Villa des Fleurs*. This cottage would become the site of Rosine's literary salon where she would host the elite of the Algerian cultural scene. During frequent soirées, she would capture the attention of her guests with stories she had recalled from her maternal grandmother. Enraptured by her tales, Rosine's friends encouraged her to publish her stories.

According to Dugas, this was when Raoul Tabet, Maurice's nephew, entered the picture. She engaged the young man as a personal secretary. Paul Tabet's biographical account identifies Raoul as the son of her mother's cousin. It also claims that the stories came not from a familial source but rather from Aisha, a co-wife in the harem of which she had supposedly been a member. It suggests that the hiring of Raoul was necessary because Leila was illiterate. In contrast, Dugas points out that Rosine had attended French government schools and that writing "does not seem beyond Rosine's means[66]." Tabet asserts nevertheless that Raoul wrote all of the stories and novels published under the name Elissa Rhaïs. He cites this as the reason, once the fraud was discovered by the French Ministry of Education, that she was not awarded the *Légion d'honneur* that she had coveted. He furthermore alleges that the older aunt at the age of 37 made her 20 year old nephew and secretary her lover and forced him to continue writing and reaping for both of them the financial rewards of "her" success. All this, claims Tabet, he learned from his father's deathbed confessions, which the son guarded in silence for twelve years.

The descendants of Elissa Rhaïs have continually denied these allegations, and research has shown much of Tabet's story to be fallacious. Dugas even points to a passive admission by Paul Tabet that his father's affair with Elissa Rhaïs was the creation of an active imagination. Tabet, as it turns out, recently published his father's story as a work of fiction.[67] The popularity of Tabet's version of the Rhaïs story, which became a popular television movie in France, points to elements in the life of Elissa Rhaïs that not only lent themselves to Orientalist legend, but also struck a nerve with a rising feminist

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[66] Allali, Jean-Pierre and Dugas, Guy. "*Élissa Rhais ou la fascination du harem.*" Postface to *Enfants de Palestine*. Paris : Éditions le Manuscrit, 2007. 243.
[67] Allali, Jean-Pierre and Dugas, Guy. "*Élissa Rhais ou la fascination du harem.*" Postface to *Enfants de Palestine*. Paris : Éditions le Manuscrit, 2007. 259.

undercurrent which readily embraced a tale which reversed traditional gender roles. A woman, liberated from the confinement of a harem, who turned the tables to subjugate a man as her sexual slave, captured the public's imagination making what was truth less important than what was popular. This popularity, according to Dugas "proves that a secular fascination with the harem continues to haunt our imagination..."[68] The public is predisposed to believe in the exotic mystique of the Orient—a mystique linked to the West's fascination with the tales of 1,001 Nights.[69]

This mystique, especially of the harem, though full of exaggerated and false images of life in the Maghreb, fueled Elissa Rhaïs's popularity. It appealed to Parisian tastes and was exploited to publicize her works. During her life, Rosine made no effort to eschew this type of publicity, even permitting her publishers to bill her as a "Muslim woman from our Algeria."[70] She enjoyed the notoriety of being a "poor little Oriental girl, [who has] just left a harem to tell stories in French."[71] This was the image constructed for her, and the necessity of its creation makes up part of the great irony of the life of Elissa Rhaïs, an irony which is reflected in her writing. This liberated woman who traveled to Paris against her husband's wishes to seek fame and fortune as a writer and *conteuse* needed the assistance of men to introduce her to the marketplace and to re-invent her persona in order to achieve success in the literary world. Help came to her from prominent members of her literary salon, the mayor of Algiers, Charles de Galland, and the chief Algerianist of their time, the writer Louis Bertrand. They made her travel

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[68] Allali, Jean-Pierre and Dugas, Guy. "*Élissa Rhais ou la fascination du harem.*" Postface to *Enfants de Palestine*. Paris : Éditions le Manuscrit, 2007. 258

[69] This collection of tales is itself an Orientalist concoction.

[70] Allali, Jean-Pierre and Dugas, Guy. "*Élissa Rhais ou la fascination du harem.*" Postface to *Enfants de Palestine*. Paris : Éditions le Manuscrit, 2007. 245

[71] Publicity by publishers Éditions Plon as described by Dugas, p. 246 and Rosello p. 2

arrangements and, by means of letters of recommendation and word of mouth, saw to her introduction to members of the Parisian literary circle. Then once in Paris, she became the charge of Jean de Pierrefeu, editor of *Journal des Débats*, and Louis Doumic, director of *La Révue des Deux Mondes* and an editor for the Plon-Nourrit publishing house. The latter headed the "Operation Elissa Rhaïs,"[72] as clearly her own identity and merits would not suffice.

The fact that an educated and intelligent woman still depended upon male promotion and patronage for success was a conflict in Rhaïs's life which she reflected in her only novel strictly devoted to the Jewish world, *Les Juifs, ou la fille d'Éléazar.* From the beginning, Debourah is presented as a young woman, not yet sixteen, who "knew by heart *le Charite, la Milha, le Arbit, la Berkate Amazonn*[73] (p. 3)." She has the knowledge and motivation to be a self-sufficient, practicing Jew, but immediately following this proclamation of her education and abilities, Rhaïs describes women's disabilities in the rigid structure of the Jewish society in which Debourah lived.

> "...ordinarily in the Jewish religion, woman's prayer has little value. And her true *mitzvah*[74], her true role is only raising a family." (p. 3)

Debourah's knowledge of Jewish practice comes to her by virtue of being the only child of the rabbi. Without a son, he shares the tradition with his daughter who embraces the life of observance, but whose observances the novel overstates as having "little value." Being married and raising a family, while respecting the Jewish laws of

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[72] Allali, Jean-Pierre and Dugas, Guy. "*Élissa Rhais ou la fascination du harem.*" Postface to *Enfants de Palestine*. Paris : Éditions le Manuscrit, 2007. 246

[73] *Shacharit* (Morning prayers), *Milha* (Afternoon prayers), *Maariv* (Evening prayers), and *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after meals). The forms are preserved in this essay to show how the author presented them in the local dialect.

[74] Religious obligation

family purity, are the only obligations for which she will be honored in her community. She was also taught this, the woman's place in conjunction with her religious education.

> "As soon as she had taken her first steps, her mother taught her about the marriage dowry..." (p. 56)

This is the introduction to a passage which reads like a long complaint by the author over the status of girls in Jewish households.

> "Her trunk is always ready to be carried by hand; one never sits upon it. She rarely has a bedroom. No bed: some little mattresses strewn about on the floor. No nail is planted in the room where she lives. She must always be prepared to leave at a moment's notice, being only a passenger, a guest in her father's house. She must always be looking toward the future. One expects of her only to have a taste for the household she will one day grace." (p. 56)

The dismal, transient existence of a girl in her father's home can only be remedied through her relocation to her own household—salvation through marriage and a husband. She is reassured that someday "when you are married you will wear this color or that perfume... When you are in the arms of your husband you will go to this and that place (p. 56)." If a girl does not get married, it is not only considered tragic for her but for her family as well. Rabbi Éléazar makes this explicit early in the novel, during a description of the celebration of Sukkot.

> "Our little girl will be sixteen years old at Passover time... At this age, under no pretext, should a young girl stay in her father's house... If the young girl does not fly toward here husband, the prayers and the good deeds of her parents remain worthless..." (p. 13)

The narrator lets the reader know what is really on Éléazar's mind, though he tries to speak euphemistically, calling an unmarried woman "plaster that keeps daylight from passing through the doorway." He is aware that the Talmud describes such a woman as a "cadaver in the house (p. 15)." The ideal destiny for a young girl is described this way:

> "As soon as the girl reaches the age of maturity, the law of Moses ordains for her to be married. Multiply! Mutliply! This is the supreme commandment of the Jewish religion. It is good, moreover, that the woman, at a young age, become proficient in the wholesome duties of the household... As well, the Alliance Israelite, the Consistories, the individuals with grand fortunes, is not their essential goal with their generosity: to marry off, as much as it is within their power to do so, Israelite girls?" (p. 15)

There is an interesting confusion of mission in this last claim, that the goal of the *Alliance* and other French organs was to see the young Jewish girls married off. Though some notion of rescue was the goal, it was not by the traditional route of marriage. Even though true equality may not have been the result, even for the most liberated *parisienne*, bringing equality to women was among the ideals professed by the French agencies. In the above citation, Rhaïs seems to be saying subtly that the Jewish community misunderstood *Alliance* efforts[75], making it difficult for them to achieve their stated goals. Though they did eventually succeed, with the average age of marriage among Jewish women in the Maghreb rising to twenty, *Les Juifs* represents a time when the Jewish community of Algeria remained entrenched in ancient traditions regarding women and marriage. Debourah's fate is sealed in this custom; she cannot wait for Jacob, her love, to

[75] Confusing their generosity in providing education and basic supplies for assistance in helping women get married.

return from Paris. She would be past the acceptable age of marriage, and so to avoid bringing shame to her household, she and her father must accept the generous offer of marriage made by the wealthy Saffar family. Even with their secular educations in the French school, Jacob's sisters do not fare much better than Debourah. Despite efforts to liberate them by means of "salvation through education," they also can only hope for marriage to give them their own identity and a sense of permanence.

Marriage, however, is ultimately a financial transaction. The bride's family must provide a dowry as part of the marital contract with the family of the groom. A girl's family must have substantial means or hope for a wealthy family like the Saffars, who do not need more money, to choose a bride for their son whose appeal are her beauty and virtue. Rabbi Éléazar is not wealthy, and Debourah's dowry is modest at best, but the Saffars and Edmond so desire to have Debrouah in the family that they disregard the monetary part of the marriage arrangement. Jacob's family, on the other hand, is poor, and his parents are unable to provide dowries for his two sisters Clarisse and Clémentine. Jacob knows that his potential earnings as a great rabbi may be their only opportunity to leave their parents' home and keep their family from being shamed.

> "Of course it was a sin to leave them 'forgotten' in the house of their father." (p. 15)

The plot becomes a vicious circle as characters attempt to find their places in society. Jacob cannot be who he wants to be because his sisters need to be married in order to have stability, security, and happiness. Debourah cannot marry Jacob because she cannot wait for her beloved, and she must be married before she is too old to find a suitable husband. Jacob, unable to accept that he has lost Debourah, drops out of the

Rothschild seminary in Paris. Despite being a man, he, too, becomes trapped by gender as he becomes a bargaining chip in the marriage arrangement for his two sisters. They can be married to Joseph and David Azoulay, the sons of the family's close friends and neighbors, if Jacob will agree to accept the minimal dowry that they can offer with the Azoulay's daughter Victorine. Jacob's being treated like an object, a financial bartering chip, and his resignation to a marriage to someone whom he does not choose are emasculating, adding insult to injury in a life filled with failed ambitions.[76] Jacob is forced to sacrifice his manliness to provide others, his sisters and Victorine, with their womanhood.

Rhaïs shares this story of tragic love and loss of manhood with her readers in order to expose the dangers of a patriarchal society where a woman's identity revolves around the men they marry. Rhaïs even manages to turn the tables, making a man one of the victims of the social constraints. The tragedy of Jacob's life and his emasculation are of course exaggerated, enhancing their appeal to the French audience who sought stories which would reinforce their notions of North Africa being an exotic land of mystery and danger whose inhabitants lived under ancient societal codes. Despite the exaggeration, the story reflects real aspects of the author's experiences. Rosine Boumendil escaped from the Maghreb and the society which, despite her education, saw her as a wife of a rabbi and young mother of three. Though publicly she became Elissa Rhaïs, assuming a last name that in Arabic connotes the power of a masculine tribal chief, privately, she lead the life of Rosine, looking out for the children from her first marriage. Her life would forever be affected by the societal constraints of her native Algeria.

[76] All marriages were arranged, but men with wealth and power, like Edmond Saffar, had the ability to choose (with consent of the family) from a selection of *debutatntes*. Jacob was in no position to have any say and had to accept that Victorine was his only option.

Certainly, no matter which continent she called home, she could never fully escape her dependence on men. Without her second husband's support, she could not have had the *Villa Des Fleurs*, the literary salon where her stories were discovered. She likewise would never have gained the support of the mayor of Algiers, and the various writers, editors, and friends who created the identity that would bring her so much success. Like the tragic protagonist of Danon's *Ninette de la rue du peché*, who needed her son and the kindness of a male stranger to be saved, she achieved nothing without the help of a man. The story of *Les Juifs* is ultimately about the interaction and imbalanced interdependence between men and women trying to establish and maintain their gender roles amid the clash of old world customs with the new. This was characteristic of the stories told by Elissa Rhaïs, and this was also her life with or without any attendant scandal.

Blanche Bendahan, like Elissa Rhaïs, was an educated woman turned writer. Her career lasted several years longer than did that of Rhaïs, and she managed to blaze new trails for women writers without the evil eye of suspicion cast upon her. Her career therefore was able to follow a more traditional trajectory for an author's life. Her notoriety as a celebrated writer garnered her frequent appearances as guest lecturer at the Sorbonne and a regular radio show. During her life, she managed to blaze new trails without the creating a false identity or suffering scandalous accusations the way Rhaïs did. One of her most significant achievements was *le Prix de l'Académie de l'humour* for her poetry collection *Poèmes en short*. She was the first woman to receive this award for humor, a domain usually associated with men. In fact, French author Paul Reboux, based

on its "passionate and provocative poetry,"[77] assumed that *Poèmes en short* had been written by a man.

> "I visualized a hairy and bearded man with yellowish skin, feverish air, repressed by a life of subservience and for whom all this served as a release."[78]

As wrong as he was, there were still elements of truth in his statement. Bendahan was reacting against her upbringing in a Jewish family in Oran, Algeria. Acceptance of all the disabilities associated with being a woman in the traditional Jewish community, implied assuming a subordinate position. Educated early in her life in France, and then completing her studies in an *Alliance* school in Algeria, Bendahan's response was to embrace French culture and become a secular Jew. This vantage point is evident in her writing in which she rebelled against traditional values and transcended her own "conventional boundary of gender."[79] This rebellion fit Reboux's observation that writing "served as a release" for the repression suffered in her "life of subservience."

Bendahan's award winning novel[80] *Mazaltob*, discussed in the previous chapter, has the theme of rebellion against subservience at its core. Albert Bensoussan has suggested that it is an epitaph for the lowly woman's condition that was becoming a thing of the past. Indeed Mazaltob herself bridges the gap between generations of completely subservient women and liberated women. Her story "describe[s] a step, a state prior to

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[77] Even-Levy, Yael M. The Poetics of Identity in Judeo-Maghrebi Poetry: The Poetry of Sadia Levy, Ryvel, and Blanche Bendahan. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, 1998. 213
[78] Even-Levy, Yael M. The Poetics of Identity in Judeo-Maghrebi Poetry: The Poetry of Sadia Levy, Ryvel, and Blanche Bendahan. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, 1998. 214
[79] Even-Levy, Yael M. The Poetics of Identity in Judeo-Maghrebi Poetry: The Poetry of Sadia Levy, Ryvel, and Blanche Bendahan. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, 1998. 312
[80] *Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française*

liberations..."[81] Mazaltob is educated but fails to break free. She is in many ways like the other girls of Tetouan "but only in appearance because she knows about dreams (p. 32)." Her dream is the land about which she has learned so much in the *Alliance* school.

> "She knows just enough, still where she is, to have nostalgia for a country that she will doubtlessly never know and that she will always love as much as her own." (p. 10)

This land she whose history and geography she has studied along with its literature, language and philosophy, is a land which would give her "the right to choose her own husband, based on the criteria of reciprocal love, respect, and independence."[82] The narrator has already said, in the early pages of the story, that the dream will not come true. After all, she still lives in the same culture as Degracia where "It's nothing, it's a girl" was part of the language.

> "All of Israel is contained within these three[83] words which are so strict that it [the religion] assigns sixty-six days of impurity to a woman who gives birth to a girl, while for a boy, the period of time is only thirty-seven days." (p. 133)

Being a woman is not only a social liability, but the act of giving birth to one is considered to bring excessive impurity to the mother and to the world. The mere insinuation that one might have a girl is believed to "open the mouth of Satan (p. 134)." Mazaltob lives with this message ringing in her ears, and its pervasiveness helps to guarantee that her dreams will remain only that.

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[81] Bensoussan, Albert. *"L'Image de la Femme Judéo-Maghrebine à travers l'Oeuvre d'Élissa Rhais, Blanche Bendahan, Irma Ychou."* Plurial : La Femme Dans la Société Francophone Traditionelle. 1987. 34

[82] Roffé-Guanich, Nelly. *"La Problématique du Ghetto: Mazaltob de Blanche Bendahan."* Cultural Marginality in the Western Mediterranean. Frederick Gerson and Anthony Percival, eds. Toronto: New Aura Editions, 1990. 116.

[83] The French is "*Rien une fille,*" literally "Nothing, a girl." The "it's" is implied in the French, but the for the purpose of clear translation to English "it's" has been added though its corollary is absent in the French.

In addition to the outside pressures that impede her liberation, pressures which include the Mosaic law that "encloses the fairer sex in a giant zero (p. 69)," Mazaltob only knows dreams because of her own inaction. Although she has embraced the "salvation through education" ideology, she cannot bring herself to break ties with her past, even when Jean offers her a means of escape. The way to break the vicious circle is presented by Nelly Roffé-Guanich in her analysis of *Mazaltob*.

"The Moroccan Jewish woman must first take her destiny in her own hands."[84]

With the tragedy that ultimately occurs in *Mazaltob*, Bendahan shows her belief that like she, Elissa Rhaïs, and other liberated Maghrebi women, Moroccan women need to take responsibility for their own liberation. Mazaltob's generation was not ready, but it paved the way for the next generation of women writers who arose. There is a sense of remorse for that lost, bridge generation, but also an appreciation for the suffering they endured. This combination of appreciation and lament is evident in the hypothetical epitaph Bendahan writes for the death of Mazaltob's mother. She dies from a heart condition after ignoring doctor's orders not to endure another childbirth, which she sees as her most sacred obligation. Albert Bensoussan suggests that the epitaph, while looking to the future, reads like an elegy for the Moroccan woman of the past.

> "Throughout her childhood, she worked, helping her mother to raise a large family. Married very young, she continued to work, but this time on her own account. Between the age of fifteen and thirty-eight, she baked more than ten thousand kilos of bread. She prepared more than eight thousand lunches and dinners. She spent more than seventeen thousand hours making jellies (...). She

[84] Roffé-Guanich, Nelly. *"La Problématique du Ghetto: Mazaltob de Blanche Bendahan."* Cultural Marginality in the Western Mediterranean. Frederick Gerson and Anthony Percival, eds. Toronto: New Aura Editions, 1990. 116.

devoted more than seventeen thousand hours to cleaning the house (...). She devoted seventeen thousand more hours to washing and bathing the numerous progeny that she had in the meantime given to Israel (...). Rising early and going to bed late, paying no attention to any distractions, even going for a simple stroll, sacrificing to this devouring Minotaur: the household, her youth and her beauty, day after day, without rest, she toiled and toiled. Now may she rest in peace." (pp. 103-104)

If this is indeed an elegy, it means that the Moroccan Jewish woman of the past, at least in the eyes of the writers, was dead and buried. The women writers of the Maghreb, and those who embraced Western civilization enjoyed their liberation in the living generation, but the memories of their mothers and grandmothers were strong. In their appreciation of newfound status, there was a nostalgia for the past filled with bittersweet memories. The tradeoffs included loss of traditions who died with their parents' generation. After the losses were mourned, however, there could be solace in the fact that, among the dying traditions described in this literature, was the idea that a girl was "nothing." The body of work, is in many ways a bittersweet remembrance of the past, a way of archiving the world of Jewish women from which the writers were only one or two generations removed. In this act of memory, in documenting the treatment of girls and women of the past, meanwhile exhibiting the power of the pen, Judeo-Maghrebi authors writing in French helped to affirm the emancipation of women—to make something out of nothing.

Chapter 4:

L'École de Tunis and Preservation of Folklore

The lands in which the stories told Judeo-Maghrebi literature took place still exist. Yet the social context in which the literature developed has disappeared forever. The assimilation of Jews to French culture and language, along with improved economic opportunities led to the Jews' subsequent departure from ghetto life. As a result, the world depicted in Judeo-Maghrebi literature was vanishing during the very time in which the stories were being written. Even before the repatriation of Algerian Jews in 1962[85], and the mass exodus of Jews from Tunisia and Morocco that followed, the Haras and Mellahs had become almost devoid of a Jewish presence. The Jews' departure, which accompanied France's retreat from its colonial interests, all but guaranteed that the once Jewish communal home of the ghettos of North Africa would exist only as a memory. While Arabs and Muslims who were once the Jews' neighbors have descendants who still occupy the same locations in or near the Medinahs where their ancestors lived, practically nothing is left of the Jewish presence in most places. Albert Memmi, the most prominent and prolific Judeo-Maghrebi writer of second half of the twentieth century, reflected this loss in his book *La Terre Intérieure*:

> "Gone, disappeared... I have to ask myself if I am dreaming: how could it have disappeared forever! [...] Geographically, nothing remains of the hara. [...] Nothing, it is all nothing: worse than a ghost town, worse than ruins, from then on an imaginary city."[86]

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[85] "Repatriation" refers to the relocation to France of Algerian Jews during a the civil war of the 1960's. Ever since the Crémieux Decree of 1870, all Algerian Jews held French citizenship.
[86] Memmi, Albert. *La Terre Intérieure*. Cited in "Récit du mellah, récit de Ma." Guy Dugas. Preface to *Recit d'une Enfance Marocaine*. p. 1

Having grown up in the *Hara* of Tunis, Memmi frequently paints a picture filled with bitter-sweet emotion ranging from the warmth of family to the alienation caused by the split between Judaism and the religion of French culture. He himself was torn between two worlds, as he displayed in his semi-autobiographical novel Pillar of Salt. In the book his main character knows that despite his yearning to make a clean break from the ignorance and simple life of his family in the Hara, his protagonist, like Lot's wife, could not avoid looking back, even as he rejects both worlds, French and Tunisian. Leaving Tunis and avoiding Paris, he departed for South America. During his departure, the fact that he still felt the need to look back speaks to the disappointment he seems to express in *La Terre Intérieure* when he realizes there is nothing upon which to look back.

As Maghrebi Jews went on their "march toward the West"[87] they adopted not only the languages, but also the style of dress, the attitudes, and the idiosyncrasies of the Europeans. In this march, they "happily turned their back on the East."[88] At the same time, however, as they saw their way of life disappearing, there remained some sense of nostalgia for certain pieces of the former life. There is a strong sense of this nostalgia in the works of Jewish authors who wrote in French. Much of their writing centered around the task of collecting and inventorying stories and customs that were at risk of disappearing. The communities were experiencing a shift in the vernacular, from Judeo-Arabic or Ladino to French language, and with that shift came an initiative to preserve popular oral traditions, the folklore, and practices which were quickly becoming obsolete. The apparent goal was to retain something from the communities undergoing transformation and which would soon disappear.

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[87] "*Marche vers l'Occident.*" Term used by Chouraqui, referenced buy Guy Dugas in *Litterature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*.

[88] Memmi, Albert. The Colonizer and the Colonized. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991. xiv

As more and more children grew up into French speaking adults, there was a threat that the oral traditions could be lost along with the communities who were no longer bound by the ghetto walls. The disappearing ghettos became a frequent subject for the Jewish writers who considered the ghetto experience to be emblematic of the Jewish story in North Africa. Novels like *L'enfant de l'Oukala* and *Ninette de la rue du peché* captured snapshots of Jewish life in the *hara*, and collections of short stories like *Le bestiaire du ghetto* and *La hara conte* made up part of a larger body of ghetto literature which cropped up around the same time. The mood of these stories is generally dark, but they do express a genuine affection for the closeness of community which developed among Jews living in close quarters with each other. There are scenes of communal Jewish observances and stories of communities coming together to support one another, but they are mixed in with grim stories of oppression, violent attacks, and martyrdom. The outlook on Jewish life could change from page to page, an indication perhaps of the perpetually tenuous situation of Jews living in the Maghreb before, during, and after the French occupation.

> "[the Jewish writers who] create lifelike accounts of ghetto life,... [which] give us at the same time knowledge of and love for the people that others teach us ignominiously to hate, boldly preserve [their heritage]."[89]

Bittersweet though their existence was, as familiar ways of life neared extinction, it became increasingly important to collect narratives of those ways of life so future generations could know about them. In the early 1920's, Jewish writers in the Maghreb began to gather stories, proverbs. Production of compendia of these pieces of the culture

[89] *La Kahéna, XVIeme annee, 2eme trim.* 1933. cited in *Litérature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*, p. 56.

flourished. As a testament to the close, frequently amicable relations Jews had with their Arab neighbors, much of the folklore they sought to preserve was not just Judeo-Maghrebi in origin, but generally Maghrebi. Stories of the region, no matter what their roots, were deeply engrained in the lives of the Jews, and stories of Muslim origin were recorded along with stories of a specifically Jewish bent. It is unclear to whom certain stories belong. This is especially true of the Joha tales, some of which are considered Jewish while others are about Muslims, and still others are simply part of the shared regional folklore.

One particular group was largely responsible for initiating the collection and cataloging of Jewish and other stories of the *Maghreb*. It was the group whom Guy Dugas has labeled as *l'École de Tunis*, the Tunis School. This group grew out of the local adherents of the *Alliance* in Tunis and the *Société des Écrivains de l'Afrique du Nord (S.E.A.N.)*. Authors such as Raphael Lévy (Ryvel), Jacques-Victor Lévy (J. Véhel), Maximilienne Heller, and Vitalis Danon needed a mediator to help their work see the light of day. Guy Dugas attributes most of the credit to Pierre Hubac, who was the head of Éditions La Kahéna, the cooperative publishing house he created while serving on the administrative council of the *S.E.A.N.* Hubac and his wife Ginévra committed themselves to supporting Jewish authors in whom they believed to have discovered a font of originality and creativity. They believed that only the Jewish writers could accurately and legitimately portray the lives they knew first hand; in contrast, while outsiders who attempted to tell the stories of *Maghrebi* Jews tended to exaggerate in their appeal to the Western taste for the exotic. Hubac showed this attitude in his preface to *L'enfant de l'Oukala*.

"Ryvel is of the people and does not put on the airs of the 'protectors' whose work reeks of melancholy and who deserve to be smacked. In truth, in this work, there is a fresh point of view worthy of being noticed."[90]

Hubac sensed the degree to which the *hara* as subject matter lent itself to stark realism, and believing he had discovered something truly new, a previously untapped source of inspiration, he encouraged teachers like Ryvel and Danon whose work gave them intimate knowledge of the ghettos to focus on this area, which few could know or describe as well as they could. The attempt to capture, through literature, images of ghetto life is the primary uniting characteristic of *l'École de Tunis*, and one of their key methods was to collect short stories, the folklore of the people. With the encouragement of Pierre Hubac, the Tunis School maintained a connection to the oral traditions with which they and generations before them grew up. They took those stories, passed down orally in Arabic or Judeo-Arabic, and put them into French, providing access to them for all future generations.

"The only role that the author intends... is to put into circulation words that do not belong to him and that pre-exist his intervention in order to make them endure."[91]

The ambition of these writers was "to inventory, to save from oblivion, the treasures of the folklore and of the popular speech of the Jews in North Africa."[92]

Even when they advanced beyond mere cataloging, they still applied the styles, influences, and motifs of the oral tradition.[93] Though recorded stories appearing in the

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[90] Hubac, Pierre. Preface to *L'enfant de l'Oukala*
[91] Dugas, Guy. *Littérature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*. p. 207
[92] Dugas, Guy. *Littérature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*. p. 148
[93] Dugas, Guy. *Littérature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*. p. 56

volumes of collections are not literary creations of the authors, in the standard sense of the word, it does require a literary sense and a certain level of language mastery to translate stories known through oral transmission into writing in another language. The art of ollecting folktales and customs, not unlike the endeavors of the Brothers Grimm, combines storytelling with skillful writing. Dugas accentuates this point, the connection between telling and gathering, with a citation from a later Judeo-Maghrebi writer, Max Guedj. In *Mort de Cohen* d'Alger, Guedj makes an effective play on words.

> "A method of recounting [*conter*]—after all—is nothing but a method of accounting [*compter*][94]."[95]

The goals of these compilations were less about literary creation than they were about inspiring a sense of gratitude in the reader—gratitude that the story was preserved so that he could enjoy it.[96]

Continuing in the spirit of preservation of *l'École de Tunis*, this chapter will present several stories which appeared in the compilations in a new vernacular—English—so that they may be exposed to a new audience. The stories that follow comprise only a small selection of the stories published by members of the Tunis School. I can only begin to represent the larger body of literature which sought to preserve the folklore and heritage of the Jewish communities in Algeria and Morocco as well. Some of these stories, such as those of the Joha (or Ch'ha as he was called in certain regions) could easily cross borders, while others are indicative of their specific locations.

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[94] "*Comter*" literally "to tell (as in a story)" is a homophone of "*compter*" literally to count as in financial accounting.
[95] Dugas, Guy. *Littérature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*. p. 147
[96] Dugas, Guy. *Littérature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*. p. p. 207

The first set of translations comes from *Le bestiaire du ghetto* written by Ryvel. All of the stories, as the title implies, have animals as their subject. In some, animals are talking characters interacting with various other species, while others treat animals in fable-like fashion, as examples to teach moral lessons. Some have as their goal the explanation of the particular animal's origins. Within this collection is evidence of a whimsical tradition of storytelling as well as an anchor in the biblical tradition as one can see in the introduction which links the stories to King Solomon. Some of the stories are religious or spiritual in nature while some are meant only to entertain. Whatever their purpose, they provide a glimpse into the lost culture of the Jews of Tunisia.

Le bestiaire du ghetto

Ryvel and J. Véhel

Introduction, p. 7

King Solomon, the wise man that he was, knew the language of animals. He had frequent conversations with them. His straight-forward philosophy must have influenced them as much as it did the commercial dealings of men.

King Solomon left behind a guide in which he taught the language of animals. Unfortunately this precious book was entombed under the ruins of the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem.

The few privileged individuals who had the good fortune to study this book, the only of its kind, religiously transmitted its contents in the form of teachings in which, according to the custom, they included the rich tradition of storytelling.

Passed from mouth to mouth, over many centuries, this folklore remains.

Though it may be questionable how appropriate some of these stories are to tell to children, it is clear that many are intended to serve as fables with clear morals. A recurring motif is the transformation of people into animals as punishment for improper behavior. Stories like "The Donkey," "Butterflies," "The Frog," and "The Bat" are warnings to children to behave and to be mindful of their parents. Some of the explanations, specifically in "The Frog," seem to hint at old superstitions that explain a particular physical malady. In this sense, we find regional versions of what the Ashkenazi world would call a *bubbe meise* (old wive's tale). Some of the stories have attached to them an "exegesis (*exegèse*)" as in "The Donkey" or, in "The Bat," a description of a folk diagnosis which involves that animal.

The story of "The Horse" also involves a transformation, but in this case it is part of a messianic dream in which all enemies of the Jewish people will become working beasts, ridden by the children of Israel into the Holy Land. It is a sign of hope and the aspect of revenge is an indicator that Jews' lives were embittered at the hands of a cruel majority. There is also a hint of that they considered Zion[97] to be the destination of the messianic wish. The origin of this story likely precedes any development of a notion that France and its culture provided a new potential Zion where Jews could live free from oppression. Its preservation in this collection indicates that this traditional hope for return to Jerusalem still remained even into the era in which Ryvel transcribed it into French. The popularity of this idea at the time, however, is as questionable as who the targeted audience was. If it was for the readers in Franch, it was a taste of a far-off place and bizarre customs. If it was for the Jew of Tunisia themselves, this story, as well as the others, is a relic of bygone time.

[97] Jerusalem

The Donkey, p. 9-10

"My son, these donkeys that you see used to be children. Just like you, but more misbehaved. Lazy, stubborn, roaming the streets, they brought their parents much bitterness. Having lost his patience, one father begged God to take care of his ungrateful son-- not by killing him though. He was, after all, the flesh of his flesh. Instead, he wanted God to punish him by turning him into an animal. God answered this prayer. The child was changed into a donkey. Other fathers followed suit making the same wish. Other miscreants were transformed into beasts of burden."

"Forever?" the young boy asked, a little worried.

"No. When those parents purify their hearts in place of their children, they return to their original form."

"I will always be obedient, Papa."

Nearby, Kiki, a mischievous sort, twisted and spindly-legged, was hopping and grinning excitedly.

"What is the matter?" the father asked.

"That thing you were just talking about," said Kiki, "I know a story that will amuse your boy."

"Do tell."

Kiki told the following story:

"An honest peddler one day bought a fine specimen of a donkey at the market. Having placed a rope around his neck and pulling it, he started down the road to his village. But Jeha was waiting for him, as was his custom, to play a trick on the peddler.

He carefully untied the animal, passing it over to an accomplice and placed the same rope around his own neck.

"On and on they went.

"At a deserted intersection Jeha stopped suddenly. The peddler turned around.

"Shock. With tears in his eyes, Jeha told his story:

"'I led the sad life of a donkey when you purchased me. My parents have just purified their hearts on my behalf. Without a doubt, it is your piety to which I owe this. Forgiven, I have returned to my original form.'

"Éma, the traveling salesman untied him and said:

"'Return to your home, my young friend, and no longer be for your parents a source of affliction.'

"The following week, our peddler returned to the market to buy another animal. He found himself face to face with his former beast who had become a man. He recognized the animal by a white splotch it had between its eyes.

"'Ah. You have again angered your parents,' he said twisting its ear. 'But this time, I shall not save you, believe you me. And may the Heavens make it so that you suffer in the skin of a donkey, evil miscreant!'"

Exegesis:

Do you know why the donkey makes his braying noises? It is because his long ears hear distant voices. One says:

"Donkey, donkey, all the females have died."

And you hear his cry: "hee haw!.... hee haw!..."

But another more friendly voice makes the correction:

"No, no, there still remains one!"

In that case, the donkey stops his crying and sighs: "haw...aw!"

Butterflies, p. 76

"Don't touch them, son, for they are people's souls."

"What Grandpa? These butterflies?"

"Yes, little one."

"Why do they fly around the room so?"

"These butterflies, these souls of the dead, they long to revisit the living. They arise from their resting place and come to us."

The child sat there in wonder.

"Whose soul is this, this beautiful white butterfly?"

"That's a young girl or an innocent teenager."

"And this one, with the big eyes, the red and black wings?"

"That is the soul of a wicked man."

"And if I were to trap him, Grandpa? To punish him?"

"No, my child. Our books teach: 'Peace unto the dead! That they may all be forgiven!'"

The Frog, p. 52-53

"Wicked little child! What did this frog do to you that made you attack it?"

"It is so wicked," said the grimacing boy.

"No. It is your deed which is wicked."

The next day, after a restless night, the child awoke with his eyes stinging. Unable to open them, he called to his mother.

"Little rascal, I understand. Yesterday, you must have done something bad to a frog."

The child smiled:

"I killed it with rocks. You should have seen it, Mom. Every stone hit the mark. I am a good thrower."

"So good that you killed it."

"I guess so. It was not moving. Unless it was playing dead..."

"Pour little child, don't you know that this creature is getting revenge? Even dead, it returns during the night, slips into the bed of its tormentor, and sews his eyes shut."

"How will I see? Am I going to be blind?" The child trembled

"No, my dear! God forgives children who repent and promise to behave better. If you want your eyes to open again, give to charity."

"Mother, my money jar is full. Break it open and give what is inside to a beggar."

"Ah, sweet treasure!"

"Mother, dear mother!"

"Come on, go to sleep, my dear."

"Mother, I will no longer say that frogs are ugly."

"That's nice, my child."

"So it won't come again, Mother, say like tonight?"

"Sleep in peace. It has forgiven you."

The Bat, pp. 25-26

There was once a poor girl – May God preserve our lineage—brown-haired and beautiful. During the day, avoiding housework, she spent her time dressing herself. And at night, she left her house to run around with the young men.

She was the shame of her parents- humble and pious people. Chagrinned, destroyed by this terrible behavior, the father, one night as he was crying beside the empty bed, was surprised to hear himself unleash the following curse:

"May God turn you into a bird, wicked girl who goes from one suitor to the next without attaching yourself to a single one. May you be plunged into the darkness and may your blind flight recall your behavior… Since you have eroded my heart with shame and pain, as well as the heart of your mother, may your body beneath your wings be like a mouse."

And thus, God created the bat[98], the wish of the old man having been spoken at the very moment when the Gates of Heaven opened to receive the prayers of Man.

A common practice:

At dusk, the children of the Hara, with long reeds, stir the bats into motion, sending them in every direction, in their zig-zagging flight. Some of the bats, injured, dizzily fall to the ground. The little hunters gather them, nimbly wrapping their wings around their necks. Then they go their mothers to present their prey.

[98] In French *chauve-souris*, lit. "bald mouse"

The mothers cut the animals' necks. They guide the wound over the body parts of their daughters covered by light fuzzy hair. The bleeding stopped, they burn the bloodless body. Then they crush it and mix the warm ashes with some monk's bane.[99]

It is the Oriental *kohol*[100] who provides this fascinating spectacle.

The Horse, p. 27

"When the Messiah comes, all the dead shall rise. And the evil *goyim*[101] who perpetrated evil, or wished evil upon us, will be transformed into riding horses. The children of Israel will ride them. And on the way to the Holy Land...."

With his shaky voice, the old rabbi spoke the naïve, millennia-old dream. And the children listened to him, mouths agape, carried away with the joy of the imagined, wild horse ride.

"Oh!" said one of the children. "How we will laugh. I already know who I will choose. Our landlord-- the tall and evil man. He will make a fine French riding horse."

"Me, I will mount the son of the oven keeper. And I will strike him for all the times he has struck me."

"And me, I will ride atop the widow in whose house my father works. He labors while she gets richer. I will make her work, the lazy broad. What a magnificent fat mare. Giddy up! Whoa girl."

When the Messiah comes, all the dead will rise....

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[99] A powdered root believed to have medicinal properties.
[100] Community
[101] Hebrew word literally meaning "nations." In common usage, refers to all non-Jewish people, usually in a pejorative sense.

The next two stories, "The Monkeys" and "The Sole", are directly related to biblical stories. "The Sole" seems merely to be a curiosity meant to amuse by tracing the origin of this thin fish to the Red Sea's parting, In contrast, "The Monkeys," in its explanation of the origin of these precocious primates, accentuates the exegesis of the Tower of Babel story which punishes mankind for the hubris of trying to reach the Heavens. Like many of the stories, it involves the transformation of men into animals, but here it serves less as a warning to children against specific behaviors than it does a general warning against having excessive pride in the face of God's power. The purpose of both of these stories is likely to entertain, but they help the reader understand how religious texts were applied in the storytelling tradition and how they influenced literary creation.

The Monkeys, p. 87-88

So all the Earth had but one language and the same words.

They had left the Orient, finding themselves in a plain in the land of Shinear, and they dwelled there:

"Let us build a city of bricks and bitumen. And in the city, there will be a tower so tall that its tip will touch the sky."

Day and night, without rest, for many weeks and months, they worked.

On the open plain, one after the other, beautiful homes appeared. In the middle, massive and large, the tower rose as a heavenly challenge.

Higher! Even higher! The sky eluded each measure. Ruggedly determined, they toiled...

The Eternal came down to see the city and the tower that the sons of men were building. And the Eternal said:

"Here, they comprise one people, and they all speak the same language. And thus they undertook this task. Now, nothing could stop them from doing all they have planned.

"Let us go down and confound their speech there, so that they no longer understand one another's speech."

Thus the Eternal scattered them from there over the face of the Earth. And they stopped building the city.

But the most determined ones, those who had been all the way at the top of the failed tower and who had perhaps seen unspeakable wonders, when they came down

among the other men, no one could recognize them. Long tails had grown out of their backsides, and their feet had become like hands.

The All-Powerful had turned them into monkeys. So that they could not tell the other men what their eyes had beheld.

Look at them: the memory of the forbidden vision torments them still. In the highest branches of the tallest trees they climb. They climb in hopes of reaching the divine abode they had only glimpsed.

The Sole, p. 89

"Moses extended his hand over the sea. And the Eternal drove back the waters with a wind from the East. He turned the sea into dry ground and the waters were split."

Thus says the Torah.

However, while God was dividing the tides for us, some fish ended up cut in halves, and became sole.

Three of the key figures in *l'École de Tunis*, Ryvel, Véhel, and Vitalis Danon, all teachers or administrators of *Alliance* school, gathered their forces to produce a collection of ghetto stories called *La Hara Conte*. The title appears to involve wordplay in joining the last syllable of "*hara*" with the word "*conte*" which implies one might hear the title as "*La Hara Raconte*" which means effectively the same thing—"the *hara* tells [a story]." The title of this collection indicates the motivation of these writers. The ghetto in its abstract sense, as the amalgam of people, places, events that occurred within it, has a story to tell. It was the mission of the authors to piece together the story of the disappearing entity by gathering individual stories. From those individual stories, each of which is dedicated to a particular person[102], the story of the *Hara* itself unfolds. Some of the stories react to Jewish customs, others merely point out particular characteristics of the people living there. The collection includes a description of the Jews of Djerba, the Tunisian community that managed by and large to avoid the sweeping effects of assimilation. Recorded in this volume as well is the Jewish understanding of the legend of the powerful Kahéna, her history and her meaning to the Jewish people.

The story presented here, "The Legend of Slath-Frayha," was written by Jacques-Victor Lévy (J. Véhel). Slath-Frayha was an old and popular synagogue of Tunis which held the distinction of being a sacred pilgrimage site. The legend recounted here paints a picture of the architecture of the home and gives a sense of the crowded neighborhoods inside the walls of the *hara*. We also have a taste of the fear in which the people lived, mistrusting strangers who come from another country and practice another religion. Though the strangers in this story, they clearly perform some sort of magical practice

[102] It is unclear if they are patrons or the person who told that story to the author. Since many of the names are French in origin, the latter is less likely though still probable.

which would stand outside the normative religious practices of Islam. There may be sign of a lack of understanding of Islam on the part of the Jews, but the close proximity and partnership in which they lived makes that explanation unlikely. The magical practices, and their use of human flesh in their fortune seeking add to the elements of mystery and danger which shroud these fearsome visitors. Coming from Morocco, a mysterious foreign land, and being feared by the family whose house they visit, their presence casts a sense of foreboding over the whole story. Additionally, the introduction of a pure, perfect, young maiden whom everyone loves, much in the style of Debourah from *La Fille d'Eléazar* or Zaira in *L'enfant de l'Oukala* is a familiar trope which foreshadows doom. The reader knows, upon the introduction of such a character in this body of literature, that there will be an impending tragedy[103].

"The Legend of Slath-Frayha" is ultimately an origin story explaining the creation of a place which was likely familiar to the inhabitants of the Tunis ghetto. It casts light onto the fears of the Jews who lived there as well their superstitions. The reader also senses their attitude toward community as characters rally in support of each other, the memorial for an individual becomes a place of worship, and the women of the town take turns lighting the oil memorial lamp for their beloved Frayha.

[103] The vulnerable, innocent girl who is doomed to a tragic fate may also indicate a literary type borrowed from the influence of French literature.

La Hara Conte

Ryvel, J. Véhel, Vitalis Danon

The Legend of Slath-Frayha, pp. 67-72

For Madame Marguerite GUÉNARD

Slath-Frayha, one of the oldest synagogues of Tunisia, is located right in the heart of the Hara. From the outside, nothing distinguishes it, and it is hidden among a jungle of arches. In a corner of the exterior wall, coated with thick layers of limestone, a sort of trough was dug- a trough for oil. At night a flame burns there, lighting up the thin, winding path to the Bath. The women of the neighborhood voluntarily argue among themselves for the righteous work of pouring the oil each night for this simple lamp and to rekindle the flame.

On the inside, it is a temple lacking the ornate design, the excessive decoration one finds in modern places of worship. But it is large, bright, clean, and inviting. One breathes in the atmosphere of true piety and deep-seated truth. One feels at ease and the faithful willingly flow there. Even the most liberated mind, free of all dogmas, cannot avoid feeling a touch of spirituality.

Popular legend attributes the foundation of this temple to a miracle that, according to some, is somewhat comparable to that of Bernadette of Lourdes.

Before being consecrated to God, it was first a normal home, just like the others surrounding it. It had, in the local style, a long dark entryway with a floor made of flattened earth. One had to pass through the entire corridor to reach the second door

which led to a spacious, open-air patio. The residents would return inside at a decent hour, barricading themselves in their home. When, by chance, they had to go out at night to seek an emergency medical visit or a midwife, they went in groups of two or three, with old-fashioned portable lanterns called *charrettes* in hand. They only left the safety of their hallway with great caution: in the dark corners, evildoers could easily hide themselves, lying in wait to attack someone and do him harm!

For a long time, this home was inhabited by a modest family, very devoted, reclusive, and fearful. The family consisted of a father, elderly and nervous, always immersed in reading the holy books; a mother, a woman who, as her neighbors would attest, would never harm a fly and who was afraid of her own shadow; and finally of a young innocent girl, their only child and the joy of their household. Fair-haired and full of life, slender, a face lit up by large, blue eyes, so gentle beneath her long lashes, with supple, laughing lips, the young girl was the embodiment of grace and goodness. Adored by her parents, she was loved by everyone in the quarter, all who in turn sang her praises. Her mother who searched her heart for a word which described all of her maternal love, called her daughter *Frayha*, which means "little joy." She was, in effect, the joy of her old days, "the apple of her eyes." The neighbors quickly adopted this fitting nickname, and the young girl, forever more, was called only Frayha...

One day, two Moroccans searching for hidden treasure, as was, it would seem, the favorite occupation of the citizens of the Regency of Morocco in this long ago era, asked permission from Frayha's parents to do some excavations in the dark hallway where, they were certain—their sorcery never led them astray—an important treasure was hidden.

Fearing their reprisals, the old Bible commentator gave in to the Moroccans' request. They returned at nightfall with a large collection of strange objects, some mysterious spell books, and candles made of, as the gentlemen claimed, human fat extracted from dissected babies, unfortunate victims of these kidnappers. The two partners squatted facing each other and began the work of chanting incantations while wildly gesticulating and staring intently at one particular spot of ground. Having double-locked the patio door, the residents of the house were carefully cloistered in their rooms, leaving the treasure seekers to their scheme. But little Frayha, overcome by curiosity, understandable for a girl her age, hid behind the door where she watched the activity of these *Mograbins* through the keyhole. Holding her breath and squinting, she saw one of the men take a lighter and light a candle, and with the light of this lantern light the ground began to glow. A second, a third, and a fourth candle were lit in succession, and, bit by bit, the ground opened up until, in the gaping hole, they saw in the depths of the earth the most marvelous treasure that ever existed. Not losing any time, the magicians threw down their rope ladder, and one of them descended, returning to the top with bars of gold, precious vases, rare jewels. Meanwhile the other man frantically filled sacs with the loot. When the sacs were filled, the men took them on their shoulders, gathered their books and left. One by one, the candles burned out.

The young girl was stunned by what she had just witnessed, undetected, unheard. She stood a moment gripped by a state of shock. Then, carefully opening the door, she entered the corridor. Feeling her way in the dark, she kicked the lighter that the magicians had left behind. She picked it up and struck it to start a flame. She discovered that the melted candles of human fat had been splattered on the ground. She gathered up some of

it in her hands. It was still warm as she molded it around a piece of chiffon, making it into a large torch that she set down nearby and lit. She watched the ground again open under the glow of the light. Crouching down near the opening of the pit, she saw that the two men had not taken quite everything. There remained yet some riches in this storybook-like treasure.

Oh how she wanted to take for herself these marvelous things whose very presence filled her soul with ecstasy, as if it floated above her body with excitement!... As luck would have it, the rope ladder was still there, and she took hold of it. Her heart beating rapidly, she stepped down into the ground, descending into the pit. Within her, excitement was mixed with fear. She found herself in the midst of this paradise, moved deeply by her surroundings. She reached out her hand, grabbed a pearl necklace, and giving in to her girlish instinct, she put it on, feeling quite proud of herself. She tried on many other jewels, the likes of which she had never imagined even in her wildest dreams. Then, clutching a finely crafted, engraved wooden chest filled with golden coins, she climbed carefully back up the ladder. She placed the chest at the edge of the pit and went back down. Amazed with discovery upon new discovery, she called to her parents. Alarmed, they, who had innocently believed their daughter was sound asleep in her bed, ran quickly.

They had just enough time to crouch down next to the pit where they saw Frayha. Then, at that very moment, the torch ran out of fat, and the hallway again fell into darkness. The ground slowly closed, greedily holding in its belly, along with the breathtaking assortment of precious goods, a magnificent, living jewel: Frayha.

Hearing the panicked cries of the parents, neighbors, lanterns in hand, came running. Immediately a rescue attempt was begun to pull the child out of the terrible grave in which she had been buried alive. But every effort was in vain. Careful digging and deep excavations were undertaken, and knowledge was sought from sorcerers and sorceresses, people devoted to combating gnomes and dwarves, those infamous guardians of treasure who were now Frayha's jailers, but all was for naught.

The popular superstition dictates that when one discovers a treasure—which they say happened frequently once upon a time—one must never call to another, or else he will see the treasure turn to coal or be buried with it.

That is what happened to poor Frayha. Her parents, in order to preserve the memory of this tragic misadventure and of their beloved daughter, resolved—*ad perpetuam rei memorium*--, to offer the contents of the wooden chest, to turn their home into a synagogue which would carry the name of the dear departed.

And that is how Slath-Frayha became, as well as a house of prayer, a pilgrimage site for those who knew the young victim or who have learned of her sad demise.

J. Véhel

César Benattar joined in the work of gathering folklore of Tunisia. The subtitle of his collection *Le bled en lumière* (the village[104] under light), is "*Folklore Tunisien*" (Tunisian Folklore)." The title indicates that the collection will not be specific to the Jewish experience, but will encapsulate the stories and experiences of the entire spectrum of Tunisian residents, Muslim, Jew, and colonizer. There are specifically Jewish stories dealing with subjects such as levirate marriages[105] and the Jews of Djerba (like in *La hara conte*), and there are some for which no ethnic group can take full ownership. Many of his subjects are caricatures of particular types such as Messaoud and Messaouda, stereotyped *nègres* from the Sudan. They are treated as innocent fools whose antics are mocked and laughed at in the stories of Tunisia. In these stories, one can sense ethnocentric, if not racist[106], attitudes as Sudanese characters are treated as subjects to be mocked, much like the Moroccan character Rabbi Chloumou in *Les Juifs ou la fille d'Eléazar*. "Rabbi" is merely an ironic nickname given to this simpleton from the Regency of Morocco who is constantly the subject of merciless teasing.

Among the character types whose stories Benattar captured in *Le bled en lumière* is the infamous Joha. Several pages are devoted to these tales which, though popular in Jewish communities of Tunisia, transcended all races and peoples of North Africa and the Arab world. Like their counterparts in the Ashkenazi world—stories of the Shlemiel or of

[104] The resonance of the word *bled* is unclear. It means a small village, but can also carry a negative connotation implying a dirty or undesirable place.
[105] The practice of a brother marrying his brother's widow if deceased had no offspring to carry on the name or to receive his fortune. Jewish tradition prescribes this as an obligation, even if it means the second brother is to take a second wife. If the living brother refuses, he and the widow perform a public ritual formally denouncing this obligation.
[106] There is an implication of racism, but one cannot say with certainty that the attitude toward the Sudanese is based on skin color (the way racism is understood in America) or if it is more about a regional rivalry in which the color of one's skin was incidental but a distinguishing mark. The use of the word *nègre* probably did not have the type of resonance, in the place and time in which Benattar wrote, that its English counterpart does in America today.

the Wisemen of Chelm—stories of the Joha come in many forms and multiple regions, causing discrepancies among competing traditions. Some stories are long, didactic tales, while others may be shorter, told simply for amusement. Some are humorous, and others tragic. Frequently, Joha is a bumbling idiot, and other times he may be an exceedingly shrewd trickster. Even the name of the central character is in question, with variant pronunciations and spellings dominating in different parts of the world.[107]

> "In Egypt he is called Goha, in the Sudan, Jawha, in Algeria, Jeha, and in Morocco, Jha. (The name gets shorter and shorter as one approaches the Atlantic.)"[108]

Other names by which he is known are Jahan (Malta), Giufa (Sicily), and in various parts of Italy, he is called Jofa, Jufa, Jugale, Jugane, Giuvale, or Giucca. Though most popular in countries in which Arabic is spoken, his fame spread throughout Europe, and tales of his exploits are believed by some to have influenced Cervantes in his creation of Don Quixote, whose last name bears a resemblance to some of Joha's various appellations.

The beginnings of the Joha stories seem to have taken shape in Turkey. He may have actually been based on a real historical figure, Nasreddin Hodja who lived in the early 13th century C.E. Various analyses of subject matter and encounters with particular historical figures suggest that a historical Joha could have lived as early as the 11th century C.E. and as late as the early 15th century C.E. because of legends of his interactions with the Ottoman Sultan Timour Lang. There is also a school of thought which believes that Joha's origins were much earlier and that the man who inspired the

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[107] In the story "The Donkey" appearing in *Le bestiaire du ghetto* Joha's name appears as Jeha. In *Le bled en lumière*, Benattar chose the orthography of Ch'ha. The translations in this paper have preserved the orthographies selected by the authors.

[108] Lunde, Paul. "A Man of Many Names." Saudi Aramco World. May/June, 1971. pp. 8-9

mythical character was a member of a Bedouin tribe in the Middle East. In any case, there seem to have been two parallel traditions, Nasreddin Hodja and the Joha, both telling stories of an infamous simpleton, at times capable of executing elaborate practical jokes. The two traditions seem to have merged in the 16th century C.E.[109]

Joha stories were wildly popular in North Africa and in just about every community where Sephardi Jewry thrived. As part of the folklore, they seem to have been a form of entertainment as well as way to release frustrations with the Joha tormenting would-be tormentors. The feats of the clever Joha versus potential enemies or despised and threatening figures allowed Jews, among others, to deal with their feelings of powerlessness in their world. For these reasons, the stories' popularity spread; it was natural that they would be preserved in publication, and collections of Joha stories survive in Ladino as well as in Judeo-Arabic. Several collections of Joha stories were transcribed into French to be preserved, and in 1919, Albert Adès and Albert Josipovici published an acclaimed novel called Le livre de *Goha le simple*. Most collections of Joha stories appearing in English have tended to be geared toward younger audiences. I do not believe that the Joha stories, in the formats as presented by César Benattar in *Le bled en lumière* (published in 1923) have appeared in English translation. They are included here because of the place they held in Judeo-Maghrebi culture as a beloved source of entertainment.

Joha stories also served as a means to vent frustrations by having a fictitious hero best the pompous and well-to-do who might trouble the less fortunate, or the Jews. Guy Dugas raises an interesting question regarding this trait of the Joha: why did there not

[109] See footnote 16.

develop Joha stories in which he took on the colonizers?[110] He leaves his poignant question unanswered: Joha remained a hero of the past. His enemies and tales of his exploits were frozen in time and did not develop with the changing North African world. The only change in the Joha tradition was that the storytellers complied with the colonizers by telling translating the stories into the newly adopted language. Being stories from a distant time, the Joha stories evoked nostalgia from listeners and readers alike. This feeling nostalgia was likely the reason for the popularity of the printed versions of the stories.

The Joha stories in *Le bled en lumière*, which César Benattar called Ch'ha stories, cover a wide range of the types of stories told about Joha. Benattar divides them into two categories—"Naiveté" and "Malice." The former include stories of gross misunderstandings of seemingly simple situations while the latter show the conniving side of Joha by which he plays tricks on his unsuspecting victims. One can see in these tales that Joha's levels of intelligence and cunning are specific to each story, and they likely reflect the needs of the storyteller. Joha can be as simple as, or as wise as, the teller or listener, the reader or writer, needs him to be.

[110] Dugas, Guy. *Littérature Judeo-Maghrebine d'Expression Française*. p. 236

Le Bled En Lumiere

S. C. Benattar

Ch'ha, pp. 185-199

"Ch'ha, my children," Grandma said, "indeed was real. His tomb is in the cemetery of Bab Khadra, not far from the tomb of the last of the Abencérages, whose life was recorded by Chateaubriand. The tomb was situated nearby, as if Ch'ha had wanted to play one more trick, even after his death.

"Ch'ha was a daft and wise man all at the same time: among his credits are countless silly blunders and practical jokes. Certainly more have been attributed to him than he actually did, but after all, one only lends to the wealthy."

Naiveté

I. Raining fava beans and sausages

Ch'ha's mother was a shrewd woman and a skilled thief. Since she did not trust her son, who was fully aware of all her deeds, and since they lived in the same, she tried to keep him distracted.

One day, she had burglarized the house of the Prime Minister, where there had been a case full of jewels and precious stones. When she brought this case home, Ch'ha was there in the house. He looked at the stolen case and its contents. His mother knew that he was aware of her misdeed.

That night, she went up to the terrace carrying a sheet of iron, a mirror, a lit candle and a kettle full of boiled fava beans and sausages.

Having reached the terrace, she waited for Ch'ha to leave his bedroom and go out on the patio (outdoor courtyard enclosed by the house). She shook the iron sheet which made a thunderous sound. She waved the lit candle in front of the mirror simulating flashes of lightning, and then she made it rain boiled fava beans and sausages which threw down at Ch'ha.

"What?" cried out Ch'ha. "This is unbelievable! I have never heard of such a storm as this. I hear thunder, I see lightning, and it is raining boiled sausages and fava beans. This kind of might and power is the graciousness of Allah!"

Pleased by hearing this, the old woman came down from the terrace.

Several days later, the prime minister took note that he had been the victim of theft. He had the town crier announce that he was offering five hundred *piastres* to anyone who could identify the thief.

Ch'ha came before the Prime Minister:

"I know who the thief is, great sir, and I will identify him if you will give me the five hundred *piastres*."

"Of course," said the prime minister. "The five hundred *piastres* will be yours if you give me true information. So who was the thief?"

"It was my mother," answered Ch'ha. "My mother who brought the case to our house, that very night of the storm when it rained boiled sausages and fava beans."

"Go home, my child," said the prime minister with a touch of pity to the stunned Ch'ha. "You clearly need some rest."

II. Unusual means of transportation

One day, Ch'ha was asked by his mother to buy some pins.

He bought some. To bring them home, he rented two dromedaries and stuck the pins on the woven blankets strewn over their humps.

His mother scolded him:

"How, my son," she said to him, "for a few cases of pins that you could stick in the hems of your *jebba*[111], could you make me pay for the rental of dromedaries! You are completely impractical, and if you keep it up, you are going to bring us to ruin."

Ch'ha promised to follow his mother's instructions.

A few days later, his mother asked him to buy some wood to burn for doing the laundry.

Ch'ha went to the kindling salesman and came home with logs stuffed all throughout his *jebba* from front to back.

"But, my son," his mother said, "you have totally ruined your *jebba* which costs a hundred times more than the wood that you bought for me. You should have tied the logs together with a rope and dragged them to the house."

Ch'ha promised not to make another such mistake.

Some time later, his mother asked him to buy some clay pitchers and mugs. Ch'ha tied the pitchers and mugs with a rope that he strung through all of the handles, and he returned home with all his purchases in tow. Naturally, all of the pottery pieces broke along the way, and all he had brought his mother were a bunch of pottery handles.

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[111] Long robe, typical of the regional style of dress.

III. The blanket with a thousand legs

One day, his mother sent him to the Oued el Miliane stream to wash their Djerban blanket. Ch'ha washed it and hung it to dry beneath a scorching sun.

When the blanket was dry, he spoke to it:

"Oh blanket," he said (alluding to the fringes on all such blankets of Djerba), "you have a thousand legs while I only have two. Let's have a race to see who will get home first."

And without turning around, is started to run with all his might.

His mother saw him coming.

"And the blanket?" she said.

"What? It's not here yet?" Ch'ha replied. "It has more than a thousand legs, and I only have two. I'm going to go see where it is."

He went back to the stream. Of course, the blanket was no longer there.

IV. The moon

Ch'ha went out one night; there were clouds in the sky, and one of those clouds blocked the moon's light.

Ch'ha cried out:

"By Allah! The moon is lost. I'm going to look for it. Maybe it fell to the ground.

So, he set out to look for the moon.

He happened across a well. Ch'ha looked into it and saw at the bottom the moon's reflection.

"Well," he said, "the moon has fallen into the well. I think I'll pull it out and sell it."

He went home to find a rope and an iron hook which he threw into the well. He pulled with all his might, but with such force that he fell backward. He checked if there was anything at the end of the rope. There was a log, but no moon.

He looked to the sky. The moon was there in all its glory.

"Well," said Ch'ha, "I pulled so hard that I threw the moon back into the sky. Next time I will be more gentle."

Malice

I. Advice

Ch'ha, one must say, is a last name. In truth, Ch'ha's name was actually Yahia.

One day, a young relative came to see him.

"My uncle Yahia," the young man said, "my father left me some money. I would like to invest it. What would you advise me, my uncle?"

"My son," Ch'ha responded, "the harvest is over. Buy some wood kindling and store it away. At the end of the Fall and in Wintertime, you will sell it for a profit."

The young man followed his advice.

At the end of the Winter, he sold the wood and tripled his money.

He again came to Ch'ha:

"Uncle Ch'ha," he said, "what do you suggest I do with my money?"

Ch'ha was annoyed by being called this name which people only used if they were mocking him.

"My son," Ch'ha said to the young man, "Spring is coming and the crops are growing nicely. Buy some radishes and keep them in your storehouse. You can sell them in the Summer when this vegetable is quite rare."

The young man again followed his advice. And then, several days later, from the storehouse there arose such a stench that the neighbors complained to the *Cheikh Madinah*, who ordered that the storehouse be opened and the radishes discarded.

The young man came to Ch'ha to complain, and he was told:

"When you called me Yahia (which means giver of life), I gave you life (*ahitek*). When you called me Ch'ha (one who deceives), I deceived you (*ahchitek*).

II. Ch'ha's nail

Ch'ha owned a house in the Bab Souika quarter. He sold it, leaving a nail planted firmly in one of the patio walls.

The asking price for the house was five thousand *piastres*. Because of the nail, he reduced the price by five hundred. The buyer said laughing:

"This innocent Ch'ha is so naïve. For five hundred *piastres*, I would give him ten thousand nails."

Some time later, Ch'ha came to the house and hung on the nail a pitcher filled with vinegar and rose petals to make rose vinegar. The house became filled with odor.

He then came to the house and hung on the nail a *burnous* that he had dyed and wanted to let dry.

Then, on the nail, he hung a donkey hide, fresh and salted, but soon after a horrific odor came from the animal skin. The residents could no longer stand it. They went to see the home's new owner who filed a grievance with the *Cadi* against Ch'ha.

"This nail belongs to me, and I have the right to use it," said Ch'ha.

The *Cadi* agreed, ruling in his favor, and the buyer was quite happy to return the house to Ch'ha for just a thousand *piastres*, losing in the transaction three thousand five hundred *piastres*.

III. Country curiosity

Ch'ha was standing one morning, in a good mood, in front of the wall near the home of Sidi Abdesselam. A farmer passed by:

"My brother," he said, "I came from the countryside to see Ch'ha who I have heard so much about. Do you know him? Could you point him out and introduce me to him?"

"Certainly," said Ch'ha. "He is my best friend. I would be glad to go get him and introduce him to you. It's just that I have been put here to hold up this wall which is at risk of falling. Stand here in my place. Hold up this wall with your shoulders, and don't move until I get back."

"Thank you, my brother," said the farmer, pressing his broad shoulders against the wall. "You are really going to laugh when Ch'ha gets here."

Ch'ha took off. One hour, two hours, three hours, four hours went by. Noontime was announced from atop the minaret. Around six in the evening, an old man who, since the morning had been watching the farmer pressed against the wall, asked him:

"What are you doing, my brother?"

The farmer told him why he was holding up the wall as he waited for the man he replaced to bring Ch'ha to him.

"Oh, you poor soul," the old man said. "That was Ch'ha you were talking to. You could have been waiting here until your very last day. Go, my friend. You saw Ch'ha, and you spoke to him. You should be happy."

IV. Ch'ha's donkey

Ch'ha had lost his donkey. He asked the town crier to make the following announcement:

> "People of Tunis, Ch'ha has lost his donkey. He therefore notifies you that, if it is not returned to him during the next twenty-four hours, he will do just what his father did in a similar situation. I bid you, dear listener, *à dieu*!"

Everyone in Tunis knew that Ch'ha was a vengeful sort. So all of Tunis set themselves to the task of searching for the donkey, which they found in an alleyway near a dilapidated old house. They brought the lost creature back to Ch'ha, and it brayed happily upon seeing again his master and his stable.

"What would you have done, dear sir," asked the townspeople who brought the donkey home, "if no one had returned the animal to you?"

"Well, just as I said, and just what the town crier announced, I would have done just what my father did in a similar situation."

"And so, what did your father do?" the townspeople asked.

"My father," answered Ch'ha, "when he lost his donkey, he bought another one."

V. Acquiring a slave

The magistrate of the Bab Souika quarter, the *M'harrek* as he was called, was haunted by the never-ending stream of tricks Ch'ha was playing on him. When he would go to the Driba chief of police, and even to the Prime Minister, these high ranking officials, instead of condemning the actions, laughed themselves to the point of tears and made fun of the *M'harrek*. Thus he vowed a sacred oath that, if he survived Ch'ha, he would go to his grave, squat down, and leave there a disgusting deposit.

News of the complaint and of the vow was brought to Ch'ha.

So Ch'ha gathered together his wife, who was his accomplice in matrimony and trickery, his mother, one of those curmudgeons who the neighbors referred to as an old battle-axe whose death would be celebrated throughout the land, and several friends whose nature made them fitting companions for Ch'ha.

What they decided will be made known shortly.

Two days later, the entire city was made aware that Ch'ha was ill, more than likely after an all-night bender of drinking and ribaldry. It was well known that Ch'ha spent most of his time in the local bars and taverns.

Then the town, taking great interest in his health, heard that his condition was rapidly worsening.

Two days later, all of Tunis received the news that Ch'ha had died.

A huge crowd came to attend his burial, but instead of the somber mood that usually dominated such ceremonies, the funeral procession was boisterous and joyful.

The voices of the clergy reciting verses from the Koran were drowned out by the loud conversations among the people.

They were all telling stories about tricks played by Ch'ha.

They arrived at the cemetery. They buried Ch'ha. Then, according to Ch'ha's final wish, his two closest friends had the task of placing him in the tomb.

They stayed there, alone in the cemetery after the rest of the crowd had left.

There was something peculiar there. In the middle of the marble stone covering the tomb, there was a large hole. Even more peculiar, after the crowd had left, Ch'ha's two pals place on the tomb a small kettle filled with hot coals, and along with it a branding iron used to mark cattle and slaves: this iron had Ch'ha's name on it.

The two friends, crying into their handkerchiefs, left the cemetery shouting:

"Farewell, Ch'ha! Farewell fine sir. Rest in peace, and may the graciousness of Allah be upon you!"

They had hardly made it through the gates of the neighboring quarter of Bab Khadra when a man who had been hiding behind the gate crept into the cemetery.

It was the *M'harrek* of the quarter. He came to the tomb of Ch'ha:

"Finally," he said looking at the hole in the middle of the stone covering the tomb. "It's almost as if this hellish beast knew what I planned to do on his grave, and there is a hole there for just such a purpose."

The *M'harrek*, having said these words, pulled down his underpants, squatted, and... All of a sudden he let out a horrific cry.

Out of the hole had come a red-hot iron which left a permanent mark on the M'harrek's backside. He fled, running and screaming in agony. At the cemetery gate, he ran into Ch'ha's friend who seemed to be mocking him.

He entered his house grumbling:

"This wicked man, this jerk is going to continue tormenting me, even after his death!"

His wife helped apply bandages to his wound, and he spent a restless night in bed.

The next day, two royal messengers came to inform the *M'harrek* that the *Bey* requested his presence at his palace, the court of the Bardo.

Obediently, he came to the Bardo.

And what did he see next to His Highness? You guessed it: Ch'ha, in the flesh, alive and well. A miracle. Ch'ha was alive even though, the day before, he had been buried. The *M'harrek* called to the righteous saints, to the Prophet and to Allah! The vision however did not disappear. He pinched himself to make sure he was not dreaming a terrible nightmare. He pinched so hard that he nearly let out an audible scream. He was definitely awake.

"Speak, "the Prime Minsiter said to Ch'ha. "Here is the man you spoke of. What do you want with him?"

"This man," said Ch'ha, "is my slave. He escaped from my house and from his duty to me. It is my wish that he be returned to me."

"Me? Your slave?" said the disgusted *M'harrek*. "I don't even need to voice my protest. I work for His Highness, the Prime Minister, who knows quite well of the duties I perform as magistrate of Bab Souika, the largest quarter of all Tunis."

"Listen here," said Ch'ha. "There's no need for this debate. You are my slave. The fact is undeniable. My name is emblazoned on your body; let your pants be taken off so that all may see."

The *Bey*, highly amused, gave a signal to two guards who pulled down the *M'harrek*'s pants displaying his backside which bore the name of Ch'ha, deeply imprinted in permanent lettering.

His Highness demanded an explanation. Ch'ha offered it, telling him of the *M'harrek*'s vow and the diabolical trick that he had played on him.

His Highness ruled against the *M'harrek* making him redeem himself from servitude to Ch'ha for the price of fifty thousand *piastres*.

VI. Subtlety

While digging in his garden, Ch'ha found a pot filled with gold. He triumphantly brought it into his house:

"Mother," he said, "I found a treasure."

"Allah be blessed, my son," the old sorceress said. "It is the first time you have ever brought anything of worth into the house."

"I haven't really brought anything," said Ch'ha. "You know full well that all treasures belong to His Highness the *Bey*. Tomorrow morning, I shall bring this pot to His Highness, our lord, at the Bardo."

"My son," said the old hag, "your feelings do you credit, but do not make your rich. You worked hard today. Go to bed, and tomorrow you may do what you deem to be correct."

Tired from his labors, Ch'ha wasted no time getting to sleep. His mother waited until he was sound asleep.

Immediately, she emptied out the pot, taking all of the gold and putting it into a chest. She replaced the contents of the pot with lemons, pepper preserves, turnips, and some cured carrots. She covered the pot over with plaster that she dried under a flame, and then she went to bed.

The next day, after breakfast, Ch'ha asked his mother for his pot. She brought it to him:

"Mother, you haven't touched it, have you?"

"Rest assured, my son," the old thief replied. "It is hermetically sealed."

Pleased, Ch'ha took the pot and went to the Bardo. He was brought into the court of His Highness:

"Our lord," he said, "I have found a treasure while working in my garden."

"And where is this treasure?" his Highness asked.

"Here it is," answered Ch'ha.

He handed over the pot.

The *Bey* had a beautiful Kairouan rug brought in. A guard removed the plaster from the top of the pot and emptied its contents onto the rug which became soiled by the preserves and salted things that poured out. Everyone in the court was stunned, and His Highness was visibly annoyed.

"Listen here," said the *Bey* benevolently. "I do not intend, no matter what your intent was, to make you suffer the punishment of caning, but I wish never again to see your cursed face. Is that understood?"

Ch'ha departed, deep in confused thought.

Several months later, the *Bey* came to Tunis for the *Mouled* (the holiday commemorating the birth of the prophet). He passed by Ch'ha's booth in the *souk*[112]. Ch'ha remembered the *Bey*'s order to never again show him his face.

There was a hole in the ground next to the booth. He ducked his head into the hole with his feet in the air. As his robe fell under the force of gravity, the terrible sight of his nakedness was exposed.

"*Chteghfar Allah* (grace of God)!" said the *Bey*. "What is this I see?"

Two guards pulled Ch'ha out of the hole and brought him before the *Bey*.

[112] *Shuk*, marketplace

"And how do you explain this disgusting behavior?" the angered prince demanded an explanation.

"Well, you said, my lord, that you never wanted to see my face again. So I showed you the opposite thing."

This caused the *Bey* laugh heartily, and he gave Ch'ha five hundred *piastres*.

This last story of "Baba Abdallah and His Donkey," though not part of the Joha tradition, certainly be considered of the same mold-- it is humorous and deflates an overly pompous individual who treats both his donkey and his wife with cruelty. He ends up the victim of a passerby who pretends to help him, but in truth toys with him for his own amusement. It seems that it was included in *Le bled en lumière* for its illumination of the lives of the common man of Tunisia, a simple merchant who can fall prey to a wise outsider who claims to help. Though not explicitly stated, it could be argued that this theme represents the colonial presence, the outsider taking advantage of the native for his own pleasure. This may be the answer to Dugas's question of why Joha did not directly take on the colonizers. Perhaps the thematic link was already so strong that the outsider's name and nationality were of little import. Though it is not a Joha story, and even if the deconstruction of meaning just proposed is not true, Benattar found it compelling enough to preserve it in the French language.

This is not a story for children and might shock a modern reader its usage of peppers in relation to human and animal anatomy. There is also an element of misogyny in the way Baba Abdallah speaks to his wife. Just the same, the behavior befits the character who is set up as a straw man to be knocked down by the clever Djerban. This is an example of slapstick, even bathroom humor—a style that transcends language, time, and international borders. It may not be in good taste, but like the *yaddak* pepper which figures prominently in this story, it adds spice to the lives of those who read it.

Baba Abdallah and his donkey, pp. 178-181

Returning from the market where he had sold his barley, Baba Abdallah, mounted atop his donkey, gleefully counted his money from the day's sales. Arriving at a stream, the donkey suddenly stopped in its tracks and refused to cross it.

"Erre-hé!" Baba Abdallah shouted at his donkey. "Come on, march, you dog of an infidel, you miscreant!" But the donkey held fast and did not move. Striking it with a stick, jerking on the reins, moving to other points along the stream were to no avail. And Baba Abdallah disappointedly saw the day was slipping away, and he had a long way to go to get back to his *gourbi*[113]. This realization made him lose all his patience, and he let out his frustration with noisy complaints, angry shouting, and all sorts of ill-will toward his donkey, who remained still and unmovable.

A passerby who had been watching the entire episode, had remained silent up to this point. He said to Baba Abdallah:

"My father, why don't you buy some *l'yadak*? You slip it just... just under the donkey's tail and you'll see that not only will he cross the stream in a single bound, but he will also take you directly to your home."

"But where does one buy this item?" Baba Abdallah asked. "And what is it exactly?"

"Go to any grocer," the stranger replied, "and for only a *caroube*[114], he will give you a big bunch of them."

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[113] Modest residential dwelling
[114] A small unit of money

So Baba Abdallah entrusted the donkey, who stubbornly stood at the bank of the stream, into the care of the charitable stranger. He backtracked along the road toward the neighboring town where he stopped in front of the store of Djerbian grocer:

"Give me," he said, "a *caroube*'s worth of *yadak*!"

The merchant began to smile and gave him, for one *caroube*, a bunch of dried, red peppers which were the pride of Naboul and which were commonly called "*guern el Gehezal*" (horns of a gazelle).

His purchase in hand, he returned to his donkey, still firmly entrenched next to the stream, and under the supervision the stranger, who slyly grinned at the donkey and its master.

"Err!" Baba said. He might as well have been talking to a marble pillar. So move, dog, son and grandson of a dog, you child of sin, Satan's reject, Err-hé, wicked beast!" Everyone of these insults came accompanied by the swat of a stick harshly administered to the animal's backside. Its ears twitched but it moved just as much as the minaret of Sidi Ben Arous.

"So try the *yadak*," the stranger said.

As an act of desperation, Baba Abdallah lifted the animal's tail, oh how stubborn, and just underneath, slid in the thinnest, longest, hardest, most curved of the peppers he had purchased.

The result was astounding.

With a single, sudden leap, the donkey crossed the stream, and, galloping, braying, making a terrible noise, it took off in the direction of its master's *gourbi* which was many miles away. It covered a lot of ground very quickly, running like a bat out of hell.

Stunned, Baba Abdallah stood motionless, listening to this horrible noise as well as the eruption of laughter from the only onlooker.

Could he simply abandon his animal? He crossed the stream and started to run, but how could a poor, old man catch up to this runaway beast, that no racehorse could even match, that the wind itself could not even catch?

So, this realization came to Baba Abdallah:

"If this pepper, that this Muslim called *yadak* and which certainly has some particular properties, made my donkey run like that, perhaps it will give me the strength to catch my animal. If I were, myself, to use it in the same way..."

He turned around. His "advisor" had long gone, and then, my word, between men, this is of no consequence. Running, Baba Abdallah lifted up the back of his *burnous* and his shirt tail, and just in the same place as he had done with the donkey, Baba Abdallah shoved in a pepper, the thinnest, hardest, most curved of those that he had left.

By the Prophet! The result was overwhelming! Baba Abdallah felt the fires of hell throughout his body. He was driven by an irresistible force which made it impossible to stand still. He began to sprint with a vigor and speed that he had never known before, even in the prime of his youth.

He caught up to the donkey. What am I saying? The donkey, having arrived at his master's *gourbi* had slowed down and finally stopped, but Baba Abdallah passed him. And from a distance he shouted to his wife who, in a state of extreme confuison, watched him run. As her husband passed by, she could hear him screaming:

"Ya Fatma, ta Fatma, hé! hé ! hé ! hé ! I can't stop. Wait for me, Fatma. I'll be back soon, and if you don't straighten up, you will be tasting *yadak*, you daughter of a dog!"

Looking back at Memmi's reflection that the ghettos are all gone and his questioning, "How could it have disappeared forever?" one cannot help but be astonished by the good fortune and the timing of the efforts begun by the writers of the *l'École de Tunis*. Their work may have first been for commercial gain under the direction of Pierre Hubac, but with the decision to compile stories from the oral tradition suggests an underlying mission of preservation. The initial impulse to preserve was a response to the changing language and landscape of North African Jewry. The lives lived in Judeo-Arabic were being transcribed into French as more and more young people were growing up with the French language. The writers looked into the future and saw that French was likely to become the language of later generations. What writers like Ryvel, Jacques Véhel, and Vitalis Danon did not expect was what they witnessed after the revolutions of the 1960's. The Jewish land where the Jewish communities stood, as Memmi remarked were ghost towns, ruins, and imaginary cities.

The stories do live on thanks to the act of preservation undertaken by Judeo-Maghrebi writers. This act of preservation stands as a heroic effort to keep alive the memory of a specific culture in a certain period of time. Aside from the heroism, designation which most of the authors would have likely denied, there is much more that we can understand from the way these stories were compiled. It would be easy to dismiss these collections as mechanical acts of transcription and translation. The writers' work, however, was much more creative and constructive.

The writers interject their own attitudes into the stories. When writers tell stories, they add their own literary vision; they make choices in their careful selection and omission of details. They even have to choose between multiple oral versions of stories,

and their translations require a constant movement between two cultures. Djoha stories are an excellent example, since every region seems to have its own variant version of similar stories. The presence of two very different Djoha personalities (simpleton and trickster) in *Le bled en lumière* shows how the same character or same story might be told in different ways. In taking oral folk traditions and turning them into written folk traditions, authors selectively choose and carefully combine details to turn out their final product. They may not have created the stories themselves, but, in the telling, they have added their own writers' voices, and, implicitly, their concerns.

The voices of the Judeo-Maghrebi writers were heavily influenced by their lives as Jews in Islamic lands as well as the French presence which provided them with the linguistic tools they used in expressing their art. Such social, historical, and cultural influences are evident in the style of the writing as well as in the very selection of which stories to record. Their selections tend to indicated an undercurrent of anxiety among the Jews, whether from their status as second class citizens or in their attempt to climb the social ladder after the French had reordered its rungs. Most of the stories discussed here were all written during the French period but take place during the generation before the arrival of the Europeans. The fact that the Jewish writers, supposedly living in more comfortable times, recorded folklore which expressed the anxiety of the previous generation makes us wonder how much more comfortable they were under the French. The perceived need to preserve folklore meant that there was a worry that the culture would disappear, and the act of preservation itself comments upon what was causing the disappearance.

Even stories which take place during the French period portray the tenuous nature of the Jews even under the protection of a Western military power. The absence of Europeans from most of these stories is likely due to the authors' positive sentiments toward the culture in which they were educated. The stories however indicate that all was not as secure as one might have thought. We can see this specifically in a few of the stories from *La hara conte*.

The interactions of Jewish characters with their neighbors, such as the poor family of Frayha who feared the mysterious Moroccan Muslim strangers preserves the memory of distrust among *dhimmi* Jews for their Muslim neighbors. Other stories, not appearing in this thesis, also portray the Jews' anxiety. The plots of *"Le Muré Vivant"*[115] and *"Le Martyre de Bathou"*[116] both center around a Jewish business person being swindled by an Arab without legal protection or recourse. Both stories end tragically with the gruesome death of the innocent Jewish merchant. As the title of *"Le Muré Vivant"* implies, the imprisoned victim is entombed behind a brick wall in order to conceal the fact that his captors had stolen from him. In contrast, the tragedy in *"Le Martyre de Bathou"* actually results from the imbalanced justice system. A false accusation of blasphemy is made in the marketplace against Bathou, after he and an Arab customer have had a dispute over an item's price. The accuser claims that poor Bathou has taken the name of "The Prophet" in vain. A riot ensues, and a mob carries him to the palace of the Bey where he is given an unfair trial before being beheaded and hacked to pieces. All attempts by foreign emissaries, including the French, are unable to free or save him. If not for the

[115] *La hara conte*, pp. 13-22
[116] *La hara conte*, pp. 77-90

trickery of a popular court Jew, the body would have never been allowed out of the palace to receive a dignified burial.

Each story depicts Jews living in fear as they know that, at any moment, a visit from magical strangers, or a bad business deal, or even an insinuation that they spoke against the majority religion could put their lives in peril. Though it seems that only the story of Bathou is actually based in a historically verifiable event, the circulation of these legends as folklore points to the fact that, despite the often close interdependence of Jews and Muslims, a degree of fear pervaded Jewish attitudes toward the Muslim 'other.' A Jew's security and very life could be threatened at any moment—even after the French presence took hold. The period of colonial presence in the Maghreb, as told by the French historians or in the annals of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, was a glorious time of emancipation and liberation. However, the stories told during that time point to a different reality. The writers may not have identified them by name, but they seem to have cleverly harnessed the familiar heroes and villains of popular legend (Djoha and his victims) as stand-ins for modern contexts. It is possible that, at times, the Jews of the Maghreb identified with being victims of injustice or fantasized about taking a position of power, cleverly able to avenge previous slights.

Whether or not they are explicitly addressed, the French occupation and Western influence in general are apparent in every page of this writing. Of course, the language in which these stories were written is the most obvious indicator of French presence, but other elements of the culture are evident as well. The themes and literary styles of literature taught in the *Alliance* schools were closely imitated by Judeo-Maghrebi authors. The genre of short story collections, itself, was a European style, one which was studied

in the *Alliance* schools. There were also themes which were borrowed including martyrdom of the innocent maiden and the motif of a wrongfully imprisoned man being entombed behind a wall. The men and women educated only in the classics of French literature could not help but borrow from and imitate the familiar styles. Even if their intent was colonialist critique, they, by virtue of their language choice and literary repertoire, advanced the culture of the colonizing force. Conversely, even as they advanced colonial values, these stories preserved a voice of resistance that was no inextricably linked to the oral traditions of a pre-colonial past.

Conclusion

In concluding my thesis, I first return to Albert Memmi's question addressed in the introduction: "Can there be a Jewish literature?" *La littérature Judéo-Maghrébine d'expression française* is a colonial literature. That is to say that it came to be as part of and in response to France's colonial enterprise. In many ways it represents, like the works of Chinua Achebe, the realities, the benefits, the abuses, and the atrocities of colonialism. In contrast, however, the goals of these works, though they were often critical, were commercial. Their intent was not to effect change but rather to tell stories which represented the lives of people in the Maghreb. There is much that readers in the 21st century can learn from these stories about world politics in general. It just so happens that Jewish writers, responding to specific colonial policies that affected the Jews in a particular way managed to say a great deal about experiences and changes that were specific to the Jewish communities.

It is unlikely that most of the initial audiences for most of these stories were from the Maghreb[117], but it is still, even with the outer-pressures applied to it, Maghrebi literature, reflecting the voices of Maghrebi people. Those voices may either be clearly heard or even hidden voices which the reader can draw out of the text. The voices, whether true to attitudes of the people of North Africa or favoring the French, are voices which help us to hear the history of the Maghreb.

Along these same lines, we are able to say that, indeed, there can be a Jewish literature because. *Littérature Judéo-Maghrébine* is Jewish literature by virtue of more than its name alone. Even if the initial audiences were not Jewish, the writing of Judeo-

[117] With the exception of the Tunisian writers publishing with La Kahéna whose reach, according to Claude Sitbon in *Regards sur les juifs de Tunisie* was regionally limited.

Maghrebi authors bears examination so that we can look back and understand how responses of past generations have helped shaped Judaism today. Responses to modernity and cultural expansion were not limited to specific pockets of the world; they were happening everywhere. Judeo-Maghrebi life was a mixture of cultures, even prior to the arrival of the French, as Jewish customs blended with Arab and Muslim customs. After the France took hold in the region, that culture was also absorbed. French education is what enabled the creation of the literature I have presented in this thesis. The literary influences were therefore the popular literature of France, the canon being taught in the *Alliance* schools. Among these works were the *Les Fables* by La Fontaine and *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* by Dumas.[118] Judeo-Maghrebi writers borrowed from those popular styles, adapting the genres of short stories and novellas along with romantic themes to tell the stories of North African Jews. Although they frequently fed into the exotic commercial taste for orientalism, they were still telling stories that spoke eloquently and passionately of the Jewish experience. Though they may not have been entirely accurate in their portrayals, they were still reflecting Jewish life in their literary creations. As Albert Memmi alluded in his article, literature is about the art; history is about the facts. History can help us understand the literature, but, equally important, is the fact that literature helps us understand the history.

Understanding the history and literature of the Maghreb helps us to understand the greater Jewish story.

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[118] Sitbon, Claude. *"La literature juive tunisienne d'expression française."* *Regards sure les Juifs de Tunisie.* Robert Attal and Claude Sitbon, eds. Paris : Albin Michel, 1979. pp. 211.

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