Sleeping Away at Rab Moshe's:

Pilgrimage, Healing Practices, and Tourism at Rambam's Synagogue in Cairo

by

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This thesis brings together my family roots around the Mediterranean, my interest in pilgrimage and travel, my scholarship in ritual and performance, and my passion for people and personal stories.

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Liliane Dammond, z”l, was born in Cairo and remained passionate about the Jewish heritage of Egypt. She passed away in 2009, but her extraordinary library on the topic enriched my work in invaluable ways. I am blessed to be the gatekeeper of some of her books about Egyptian Jewry.

This thesis is dedicated to her memory.

New York City, January 2011.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"My mother always told me that when you were sick, you went to Rab Moshe,"[1] recalled Fortunée Ambar in September 2010, using the affectionate nickname "Rab Moshe" for the great 12th-century rabbi, philosopher, and physician generally known as Maimonides or Rambam.[2] "I had terrible asthma. When I was 25 or 26, I traveled with my older sister to the old Jewish neighborhood in Cairo, far from where we lived. It was quite an ordeal to get to the small synagogue. There, I spent the night, lying down in a little alcove, and Rab Moshe appeared in my sleep to heal me. He was our saint for healing."

Seventy years later, Ambar, my 96-year-old great-aunt, speaks of Maimonides with emotion and unfailing trust in him. In fact, even though she left Cairo in 1956 and has been living in New York City ever since, Rab Moshe continues to be part of her life. She points to a door of her living-room dresser. I open it, and there stands Rab Moshe's 10 by 12 portrait, with his turban, groomed beard, medal around the neck, and signature in Hebrew at the bottom. She has rescued this portrait from Egypt for over 60 years. "There is more," she says, as she opens a box that reveals an old candle, a cotton ball and a lump of sugar both soaked in the oil from the lamps burning at Maimonides' gravesite in Tiberias, Israel. "You will have to get me some more on your next trip. I am running out of sugar—I take a small piece when I am sick."

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[1] Face-to-face interview with Fortunée Ambar, New York City, 25 September 2010. My translation from the French.

[2] I use "Maimonides," "Rambam," and "Rab Moshe" interchangeably to refer to the same person.

Figure 1: Portrait of Rambam, Cairo, 1950s (coll. F. Ambar, New York).

I had heard many stories of "Rab Moshe" in my Cairo-born maternal family. Most Jews in Egypt traveled to the small synagogue to find a cure to a serious ailment—my grandmother who had nephritis, my cousin Roger who suffered from polio, my friend Dinah for bouts of anxiety. They all remember the ritual that started with a trip to the old Jewish quarter, *Haret el-Yahud,* entering the small Rab Moshe synagogue, drinking some holy water from the well, then going down to the dark basement that was only lit with oil lamps, and finding an empty alcove to lie down, among other Jews in need of healing. There they would fall asleep, with the promise that Rab Moshe would appear in their dreams and provide a cure for their ailment. After waking up, they would return home, comforted from divine intercession.

This pilgrimage and healing ritual was performed by Jews in Egypt and beyond for generations, until the massive exile of the community in 1956. It is difficult to trace and date its origins, since, like many rituals emanating from folk religion, it was never described, recorded, or even mentioned in written documents until a few memoirs. Sharing an intimate belief and a transformative experience, especially one involving health and life, is not a common activity, especially in a society like early 20th-century Cairo. The archives of the Jewish community in Egypt, which might contain information about this building and the practices associated with it (such as synagogue records, rabbinic responsa, lifecycle events), are unavailable to the public, and locked up by the Egyptian government. However, after decades of abandonment and decay, the synagogue was restored by the Egyptian authorities, and inaugurated in March 2010, not without controversy. It has been closed to visitors since then, and seems to be a small bargaining chip in larger political debates.

The absence of written documents has not deterred me from taking this site as a case study for Jewish pilgrimage and healing rituals in 20th-century Egypt. It has given me a wonderful opportunity to conduct interviews, perform oral history, and to combine this data with theories of pilgrimage, travel, performance, and ritual. I have also found media articles, amateur videos, bulletins and newsletters published by now defunct organizations, and personal memoirs to enrich the picture. This complex case study, and the study of pilgrimage in general, begs for an interdisciplinary approach, as Alan Morinis writes, "understanding the multidimensionality of these places in their full complexity demands a collective effort that combines the methods and insights of several disciplinary perspectives."[3] My interdisciplinary training in performance studies, ritual theory, ethnographic fieldwork, and visual culture, along with my access to a variety of sources and media, have informed this analysis in five specific dimensions: pilgrimage, space, healing practices, material objects, and tourism, which comprise the five chapters of the thesis.

Another challenge lies in the fact that the Jewish presence in Egypt is almost extinct. The 80,000-strong community was forced to leave in 1956 and the following years. There are now a few dozen elderly members left, not enough to have a weekly minyan or for any religious or cultural activity. Until the 1950s, Egypt had one of the most vibrant Jewish communities in the Middle East, a community that grew exponentially as Cairo became a commercial and cultural hub in the region. In 1882, there were 5,000 Jews in Cairo, a number that rose to about 30,000 by 1917, and to

[3] Alan Morinis (ed.): *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992, p. 13.

52,000 in 1947, or 64 percent of the total Jewish population (the other large community being Alexandria)[4].

The Jewish community of Egypt was ethnically, socially, and religiously heterogeneous. It consisted of four groups: indigenous Jews who spoke Arabic and lived in the poor district of Haret-el-Yahud ("the Jewish quarter"); Sephardic Jews from southern Europe (Greece, Italy), North Africa and the Levant, who comprised the wealthiest and most educated group, worked in banking, manufacturing and real estate, and spoke French, sometimes Ladino and Italian as well. The third group comprised Ashkenazi Jews who had fled the pogroms in Russia and arrived poor in Egypt, before becoming active in various businesses. The fourth community was established in the 8th century: the Karaites accept only the authority of the Bible and reject rabbinic laws. This fractured image mirrors Egyptian society at large in the early 20th century, as Gudrun Krämer describes it: "Among the various local minorities—the indigenous Christian Copts on one hand and the Muslim and Christian Syrians, North Africans, Greeks, Italians, Armenians, and Maltese on the other—the Jews did, perhaps, constitute the most diverse community. Their inner cleavages into subgroups of different regional origin, rite, language, cultural orientation, and social status make it very difficult to speak of Egyptian Jewry as a unified whole."[5]

Given the heterogeneous nature of the Jewish community and the wide discrepancies in religious observance and Jewish education, it seems that the pilgrimage

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[4] For more demographic data, see Jacob M. Landau: *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*. New York: New York University Press, 1969, and Victor Sanua: "The Vanished World of Egyptian Jewry," *Judaism*, vol. 43, no. 2, spring 1994, pp. 212-219.
[5] Gudrun Krämer: *The Jews in Modern Egypt*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989, p. 86.

to Rambam's synagogue was a folk ritual that was common to many, regardless of gender, piety, social or ethnic background—a practice probably born of necessity. Rambam's healing power was a common denominator, although the ritual of traveling to the synagogue was an individual endeavor and not a communal practice. In the next chapter, general theories of pilgrimage and Jewish examples of this practice will shed a light on the complex case of Rambam's synagogue as a travel destination for healing.

Chapter 2: Pilgrimage

The *Encyclopedia of Religion* defines "pilgrims" as those who " feel the call to some distant holy place renowned for miracles and the revivification of faith, and resolve to journey there."[6] Regardless of the destination or the specific culture, pilgrimages share common traits: the journey "will be arduous and inconvenient, but the goal beckons;" the destination source heals; one has to be there and experience it oneself; there is some charity involved, while a pious object is brought home on the return journey. David Gitlitz offers characteristics that leave out the travel dimension but emphasizes the place and the supernatural experience: "Religious pilgrimage tends to be based on three premises: that there is an unseen power greatly superior to ourselves that takes an active role in shaping our lives; that it is possible for humans to connect with that power; and that the power is especially approachable in certain privileged places."[7] He adds, "those places are privileged because at some moment the realm of the human and the realm of the divine came into contact there."[8] From there, we can safely say that pilgrimage implies the hope for a repeated performance of a miracle, based on eye-witnessed accounts that such healings have occurred more than once at this particular place.

Anthropologist Victor Turner called pilgrimage a performance; in his attempt to define and classify various kinds of pilgrimage (mostly from a Christian perspective), he focused on the notion of process, and applied Arnold van Gennep's tripartite model of

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[6] "Pilgrimage," in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* ed. Lindsay Jones, New York: Macmillan, 2004.
[7] David M. Gitlitz and Linda Kay Davidson: *Pilgrimage and the Jews*. Westport and London: Praeger, 2006, p. 3.
[8] Gitlitz, *op. cit.,* p. 4.

rites of passage on pilgrimage—separation, limen or margin, and aggregation. According to this theory, any rite of passage begins with the detachment of an individual from a group, proceeds with an ambiguous passage "betwixt and between," and ends with the transformed individual returning to social life, to a group (not necessarily the same one as in the beginning, but a group nevertheless). Turner added, "liminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only 'going to be' but also 'what may be,"[9] which is particularly relevant in the case of pilgrimage with a future intent—healing or spiritual rejuvenation, rather than a pilgrimage done by obligation. As much as Turner continues to be considered a pioneer in the study of pilgrimage, particularly from an anthropological perspective, he was also criticized for making universalizing statements that did not work in numerous cases, for lacking empirical data and for ignoring specific and local contexts. As an example, he claims, "pilgrimages have this in common: they are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again."[10]

In relation to my case study, I found three statements that could not apply to the type of pilgrimage that I am examining. When speaking about liminality, Turner said, "pilgrimage was the great liminal experience of the religious life… the point of it all is to get out, go forth, to a far holy place approved by all."[11] The last part of this definition, "a holy place approved by all" is not valid in many cases of popular religion—a place might be held holy by the folk, but not legitimized by the religious authority or, if it happens, it

[9] Victor and Edith Turner: *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, p. 3.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 6.
[11] *Ibid.,* p.7.

is under the pressure of the people, the practitioners, not an imposition from theologians. Later, Turner asserts, "pilgrims abandon the tight structures of kinship and locality, and voyage far to their fond of healing. … At the pilgrimage's end…the pilgrim may find himself a member of a vast throng. But this is a throng of similar, not of structurally interdependent persons. It is only through the power ascribed by all to ritual… that likeness of lot and intention is converted into commonness of feeling, into 'communitas.'"[12] The notion of communitas refers to an unstructured group of people that temporarily shares an experience in complete limbo (and also independence and freedom), before each returning to their respective communities, structured places with rules and roles. The pilgrimage to Rambam's is an individual enterprise from beginning to end (except for the person usually accompanying the pilgrim in need of healing). Even when a dozen persons were simultaneously napping in the basement, their sheer presence never created "communitas," since each pilgrim (and the entourage) had an alcove, and each pilgrim was focused on personal healing, not in the communal experience of connecting with a saint.

Finally, Turner tries to classify pilgrimage into four categories: the historical founding sites, the "archaic pilgrimages" that show layers of mutual influence and syncretism, medieval sites that emphasize theology, and modern sites that are characterized by personal piety.[13] This typology looks like an imprint of Christian pilgrimage in Western Europe or the Holy Land, but it does not work with many other cases, such as the Jewish site in Cairo. While Turner focuses on the social functions of

[12] *Ibid.,* p. 13.
[13] *Ibid.,* p. 18.

pilgrimage, he does not address individual experience and the notion of the sacred. However, his definition of liminality (without the notion of "communitas," which he developed in this context), fits perfectly my case study, on three different levels. Pilgrims indeed go through a transformative process, and regardless of the outcome, the time they spend in the synagogue is "betwixt and between," between anguish and hope, between illness and recovery. They also experience liminality as they sleep, a state that is probably liminal *par excellence*, alive but not conscious. Finally, the intervention of Maimonides is itself liminal, since he is a dead man who gives life, and he appears alive in the place where he was once buried.

Pilgrimage resists typologies and universal principles, because it is locally specific, does not always respond to established rules, and relies on personal experience, embodied practices, and emotions that are particularly difficult to classify. In spite of his attempts to compartmentalize pilgrimage, Turner also wrote, "we must regard the pilgrimage system, whenever the data permit us so to do, as comprising all the interactions and transactions, formal or informal, institutionalized or improvised, sacred or profane, orthodox or eccentric, which owe their existence to the pilgrimage itself. We are dealing with something analogous to an organism-environment field: here the 'organism' comprises all the sacred aspects of the pilgrimage, its religious goals, personnel, relationships, rituals, values and value-orientations, rules and customs."[14]

One of Turner's critics is Alan Morinis, who summed up the difficulty of defining pilgrimage by saying the following: "Pilgrimage is born of desire and belief. The desire is for solution to problems of all kinds that arise within the human situation. The belief is

[14] *Ibid.,* p. 22.

that somewhere beyond the known world there exists a power that can make right the difficulties that appear so insoluble and intractable here and now. All one must do is journey."[15] In a few sentences, we have the key elements: desire to solve a problem, belief in a supernatural power, and need to undertake a journey. The journey is another dimension overlooked by Turner, who focused more on reaching the sacred destination and performing a ritual, then on the effort and experience of getting there. In his tentative definition, Morinis begins with travel: "The notion of pilgrimage is polysemous…. I tender a definition: the pilgrimage is a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal."[16] And I would add, an ideal that cannot be achieved at home alone.

Morinis offers his own typology of sacred journeys; his categories are shaped by examples from practices witnessed all over the world, and focus on the intent of the pilgrimage to a holy place. He identifies six different purposes: devotional (aimed at an "encounter with and honoring of the shrine, divinity personage, or symbol,"[17] such as places where the Buddha lived;) instrumental (to accomplish finite, worldly goals… such as a cure for illness"[18] such as our case study in Cairo;) normative ("part of a ritual cycle relating to either the life cycle or annual calendrical celebrations,"[19] such as the *shalosh regalim*, the Jewish festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot that involve pilgrimage to Jerusalem;) obligatory (such as the *Hajj*, one of Islam's five pillars, that has to be performed once in a lifetime;) wandering ("this type of pilgrimage has no predetermined

[15] Morinis, *op. cit.*, p. 1
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[19] *Ibid.* p. 11.

goal. The pilgrim sets out in the hope that his feet will be guided to a place that will satisfy his inner craving;")[20] and initiatory (its "purpose is the transformation of the status or the state of participants.")[21] Some sacred journeys might comprise more than one purpose.

In the case of Rambam's synagogue, it is clearly an instrumental purpose (healing), since this pilgrimage is not an obligation, a ritual associated with a specific date of the calendar, or a necessary experience for spiritual growth. It is instrumental also because it is a phenomenon of popular religion, or folk faith. Folk faith is often dismissed as magic by religious authorities, or associated with lower social classes. Scholars who explore various expressions of spirituality know the value of studying popular practices in the margins of religious institutions, since "popular religion refers first of all to practices and to concrete actions, and is not primarily concerned with words or the Book,"[22] write Liliane Voyé. She understands that people embrace popular religion regardless of class, education or religious observance, since it born of personal belief and need. "If popular religion appears sometimes to be naïve, this is because it generally refers to concrete situations of everyday life and addresses feelings rather than intellect."[23] In fact, pilgrimage and other expressions of folk faith have been of concern to the orthodox hierarchies of many religions, for pilgrimage draws the faithful away from the established authority, until these authorities condone such pilgrimages and

[20] *Ibid*., p. 13
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[22] Liliane Voyé: "Popular Religion and Pilgrimages in Western Europe," in: *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety,* William H. Swatos and Luigi Tomasi, eds.Westport and London: Praeger, 2002, p. 125.
[23] *Ibid.,* p. 116.

appropriate the practice into mainstream practice. In our case, a clear example of folk faith, the absence of community records or rabbinic responsa make it difficult to assess the attitude of local rabbinic authorities. Since this ritual was taking place in a synagogue (officially part of the Jewish community), we can infer that the healing practice was accepted, or at least condoned, if only by the rabbi who worked in the Rambam synagogue; it is unclear whether it was approved or even encouraged by local rabbis. Dinah Modiano remembers that her grandmother spoke of Rab Moshe and Elijah the Prophet all the time; "as if they were part of the family."[24] She prayed to them and believed in their powers; and yet, she was the daughter and granddaughter of famous rabbis in Palestine, who had to know of the practice.

Another difficulty for scholars lies in the fact that pilgrimage is an embodied practice involves feelings, belief, and intimate perceptions that do not easily lend themselves to analysis. They are part of the repertoire, what Diana Taylor defines as "performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge."[25] This embodied practice of traveling to a sacred place is predicated on the destination itself, its spiritual magnetism, its history of miracles, or its aura from supernatural beings appearing to humans. The journey involves the temporary detachment from one's home, family, daily activities, the physical effort of reaching destination, and the necessity to be as close as possible to the sacred site, through presence, touch and other corporeal experiences that will facilitate the spiritual connection. Because "pilgrimage is a process, a fluid and

[24] Dinah Modiano, *op.cit.*
[25] Diana Taylor: *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 20.

changing phenomenon, spontaneous, initially unstructured and outside the bounds of religious orthodoxy, it is primarily a popular rite of passage, a venture into religious experience rather than into a transition to higher status… Pilgrims all over the world attest to the profundity of their experience, which often surpasses the power of words."[26]

Jewish pilgrimage is also a process—stasis followed by a movement towards transformation, and a return to the original location. There are three types of pilgrimage destinations: the biblical sites in Jerusalem and its surroundings (the focal point being the remains of the Temple, with burial sites of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs coming next); the tombs of Talmud and Kabbalah sages, mostly located in the Galilee (e.g. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai in Meron); and emerging sites dedicated to Diaspora saints, usually the gravesites, that are mostly visited on the anniversary of their death. The latter category includes the Ghriba in Jerba, Tunisia, the tomb of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav in the Ukraine, and, most recently, Montefiore cemetery in Queens, NY, where the last rabbi of Lubavitch, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is buried. These places are not only distinct because of their geographic location (in the Diaspora), but because they require a movement towards remote sites in the periphery, as opposed to the Holy Land that induces a converging movement from the periphery towards a center. For the sake of this analysis, I will mostly concentrate on those sites located in the Diaspora, and particularly in North Africa.

Regarding Jewish pilgrimage to the grave of holy men in Morocco, Harvey Goldberg writes, "a person could come to the cemetery at any time if he or she wanted to be close to the tzaddik and make a personal request and vow, in addition to attending the

[26] *Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit.,* p. 7146.

annual hillula… People would visit the graveside and even sleep next to it overnight, light candles, pray, sing hymns in honor of the tzaddik, contribute to the poor who gathered at these events, and share a festive meal, involving the ritual slaughter of animals, creating an atmosphere that combined solemnity and festivity."[27]

Remarkable studies have been conducted about Jewish pilgrimage in Morocco and Tunisia[28] with their extensive celebrations, professionalism, and appeal to mass audiences to this day. Egypt is less known to be a destination for Jewish pilgrimage, except for a handful of sites, including the grave of Rabbi Abu-Hacira, "the man with the mat" who carried a mat under his arm if he needed to sit, since he would always refuse honors and comfort. A Moroccan rabbi and scholar, he traveled to Egypt in 1881 and performed a miracle by saving a young woman from being kidnapped and raped by some thugs. He died in Damanhur, just outside Cairo, before being able to return to Morocco in early 1882. Abu-Hacira was revered by Jews and Muslims, and every year in mid-January, Jews and Muslims honor him in an 8-day-long celebration. As a Jewish observer noted in 1922, "it seems that through daily contacts with Christians and Muslims in the Middle-East, Jews have let some of their fellow citizens' traditions slowly and imperceptibly creep into their practice, particularly the practice of honoring saints

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[27] Harvey Goldberg: *Jewish Passages: Cycles of Jewish Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 173.

[28] See Oren Kosansky: "Tourism, Charity, and Profit: The Movement of Money in Moroccan Jewish Pilgrimage," *Cultural Anthropology*, 17:3, 2002 pp. 359-400; Harvey E. Goldberg: *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996; Norman A. Stillman (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010, 5 vol.; and Abraham L. Udovitch and Lucette Valensi: *The Last Arab Jews: The Communities of Jerba, Tunisia*. Chur/London/Paris/New York: Harwood, 1984.

annually in solemn, half-religious and half-profane gatherings. The ritual was not fully assimilated, as the Jewish pilgrimage is not accompanied by as many festivities as their Christian and Muslim counterparts. It has kept a primitive aspect that is more grounded in religion, but definitely triggers a lot of interest."[29] In fact, many Egyptian Jews consider Damanhur a site of pilgrimage for religious Jews—a minority of the Jewish population.

Pilgrimage to Rambam's synagogue is different from a Moroccan *hillula* or other highly formal journeys to holy places, such as the visit of Shimon Bar Yohai's grave in Meron (Galilee) on Lag ba'Omer, as analyzed by Barbara Myerhoff: "Pilgrimage is then at once an inner and outer journey, the geographic, collective peregrination running parallel to the voyage down into the unconscious, where the traveler has a sacred encounter between saint and self. The lower voyage provides a personal, unconscious, psychic, and subjective dimension for the cultural occasion of pilgrimage so that history and biography blend, and a private life partakes of a larger, collective tale—each enlarging and reinforcing one another."[30]

The Cairo case study was not tied to a specific calendar date, but rather functioned year-round (except, probably, on Shabbat and holidays). It remained an individual effort towards the completion of a personal transformation, not a collective ritual. It was informal, did not involve particular preparation (except for transportation),

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[29] Elie Sidawy: "La Foire Juive", in *Revue du Monde Egyptien*, Le Caire, août-septembre 1922, pp. 600-626, reprinted in *Mahar Mizraïm: Bulletin de l'Association pour la Sauvegarde du Patrimoine Culturel des Juifs d'Egypte*, No. 16-17, December 1984. My translation. For more on the Damanhur pilgrimage, see Jacob M. Landau: *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*. New York: New York University Press, 1969, p. 43.

[30] Barbara Myerhoff: "Pilgrimage to Meron: Inner and Outer Peregrinations," in Smadar Lavie, Kirin Narayan, and Renato Rosaldo (eds.): *Creativity/ Anthropology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 213.

specific knowledge of prayers, gender segregation, or behavioral codes; and it followed a very loose structure (come, drink water, sleep, leave). While the instrumental dimension, the experiential expectation and the effort to attain the destination are similar to some *hillulot*, the Cairo site differs in its relationship to space, which will be the object of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Space

"Haret-el-Yahud is full of germs. We must do something about it, and clean up this neighborhood. We cannot let someone say, "dirty as a resident of Haret-el-Yahud."[31] This account from a horrified traveler to Cairo in 1949 gives a glimpse of what this old district looked like. This large area located in Bab Zweila, very close to the Islamic university El-Azhar and adjacent to a Muslim and a Coptic sections, was crowded and dirty. "At the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, rich and middle-class Jews left this district and moved to other parts of Cairo and its surroundings, but their place was taken by poor Jewish immigrants,"[32] writes Jacob Landau. The aspect of Haret el-Yahud hardly changed, despite the growth of the community. In 1920, 3,000 Jews still lived there (about 10 percent of the Jewish population). The area inspired the following description to a Jewish journalist: "Our people are crowded and clustered into houses about to collapse, in dark cellars, narrow alleys and crooked lanes choked with mud and stinking refuse, earning their meager living in dark shops and suffocating workshops, toiling back to back, sun-scorched and sleepless. Their hard struggle for existence both inside and outside the home is rewarded by a few beans and black bread."[33] The Jews of Haret el-Yahud, assimilated to a *Lumpenproletariat*, lived on welfare, mostly supported by the social services of the community, while the Jewish

[31] Quoted by Jacques Hassoun: *Histoire des Juifs du Nil*. Paris: Le Sycomore, 1981, p. 122. My translation.
[32] Jacob M. Landau: *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*. New York: New York University Press, 1969, p. 30.
[33] Quoted by Landau, *op.cit.,* p. 31.

haute-bourgeoisie "boasted never to set foot in this 'Jewish neighborhood' also known as 'the neighborhood' ['le quartier,' in French] or the 'Hara'" [same meaning in Arabic].[34]

And yet, the very same Jewish notables who despised "the 'hood" would leave their wealthy houses in downtown Cairo, or in the affluent suburbs of Heliopolis and Ma'adi to visit Rambam's synagogue in emergency situations. According to interviews recently conducted with Cairo-born Jews, numerous Jews would go to Rab Moshe when they needed divine intercession; but few admitted doing so. They would arrive at dusk and avoid eye contact or conversation that would identify them as caving to folk rituals in a dirt-poor area. For most Jews, since 90 percent of them lived outside this ghetto, Haret el-Yahud represented the end of the world; the journey really meant pilgrimage, with its detachment from a comfortable house, a safe environment, and a modern, Western education. As Dinah Modiano remembers from her visit around 1948, "It took days to prepare for the trip, and we traveled on a horse carriage. In those days, everything seemed far, everything required preparation and long travel time."[35] Given the lack of hygiene of the area and the difficulty to reach the synagogue, it is all the more remarkable that people with serious ailments, already diminished in their bodily functions, would make this physical sacrifice with the hope of being healed *chez* Rab Moshe.

[34] Hassoun, *op. cit.*, p. 116, my translation.
[35] Personal interview, New York City, 26 September 2010.

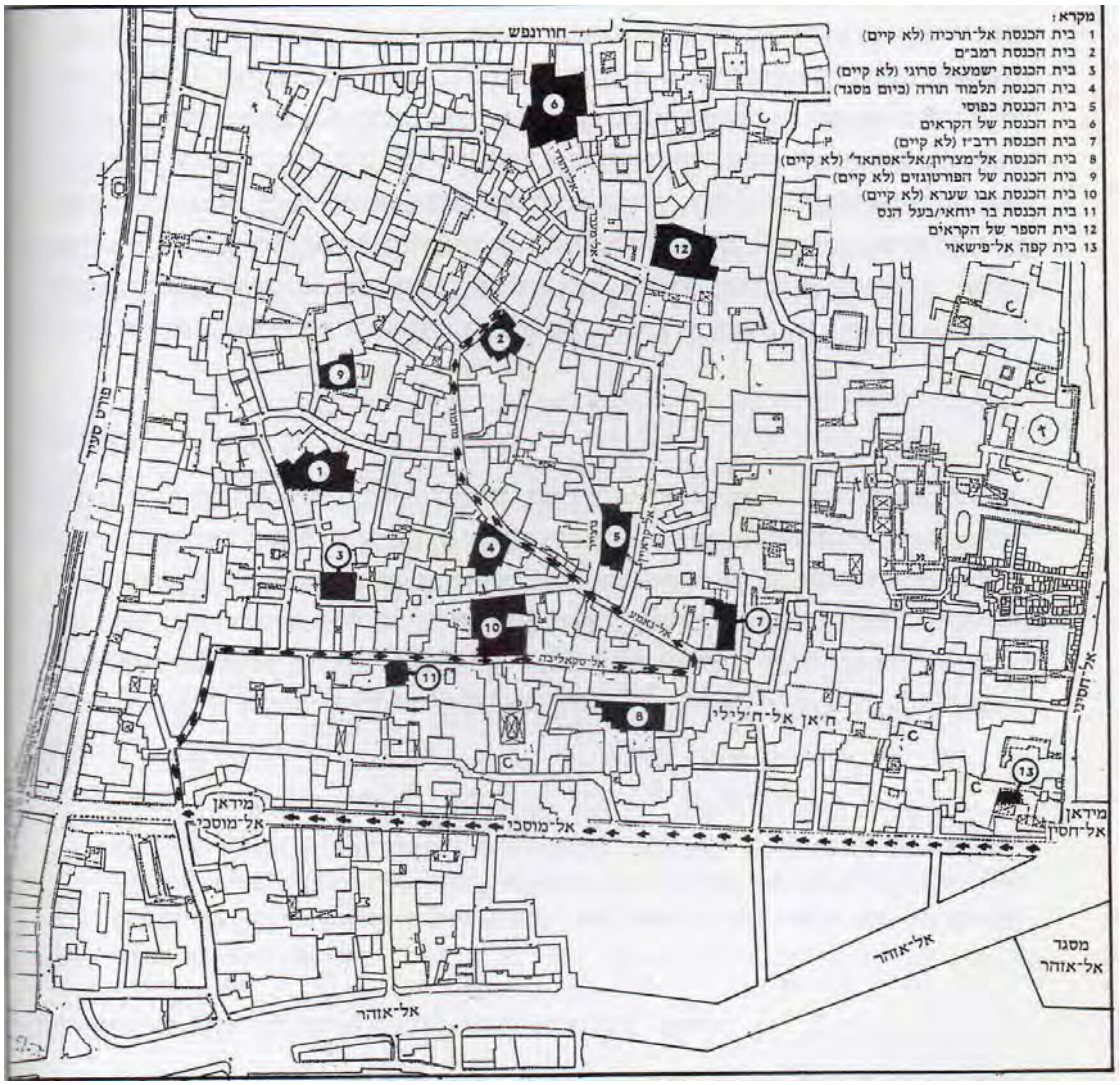

Figure 2: Map of Haret el-Yahud. Rambam's synagogue is number 2. (courtesy Yoram Meital)

"At the end of Haret el-Yahud, in this part of the Darb Mahmood called 'Atfet Hamam el-Yahud,' (the passage of the Jewish bath), stands the temple of Rab Moshe, an underground synagogue that one has to enter barefoot. Incurably sick people went to sleep there and to be healed. And they were healed! Or at least memory only recorded the miraculous cures that were whispered around. Didn't King Fuad, when he was gravely ill,

sent over his clothes? At least, that was the story that went around. Whatever; a votive plaque in marble donated by the King still hangs on the walls of this charming chapel, a fresh and quiet haven in an otherwise agitated, crazy and damp urban environment."[36]

There were a dozen synagogues in the Haret el-Yahud, many named after famous Sephardic rabbis such as the Radbaz (Rabbi David ben Salomon ibn Zimra), Rabbi Haim Capoussi, and Rabbi Yaacov Abu Hacira. Only three still exist.[37] The one known as Rambam was originally a beit midrash built in the 12th century, in which Rambam taught. In the 19th century, a synagogue was added to the building.

[36] Hassoun, *op.cit*, p. 125. My translation.
[37] Rambam's, the Capoussi synagogue and the Bar Yohai (Ba'al HaNes) synagogue (see Yoram Meital: "Jewish Life and Sites in Cairo," in: *Bulletin of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo*, no. 20, April 1997, pp. 12-16.)

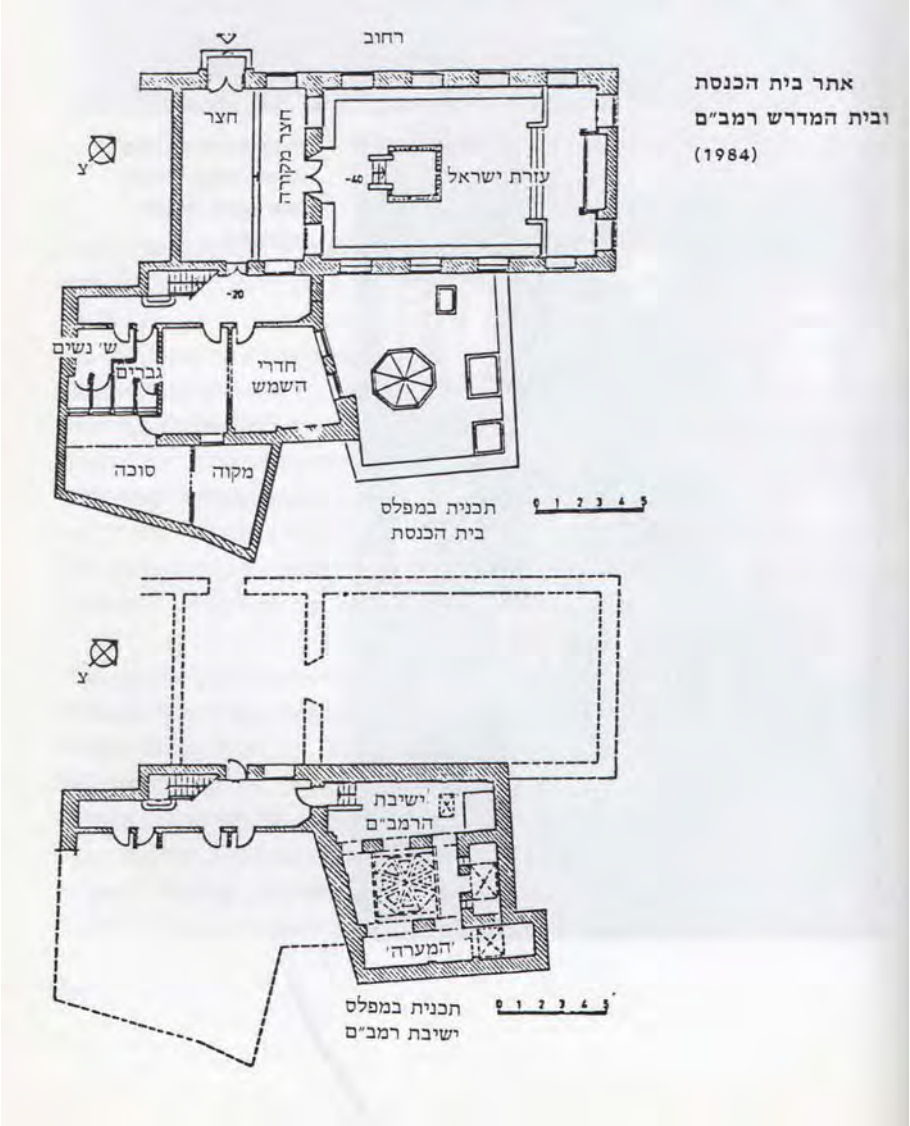

Figure 3: Floor plan of the Rambam synagogue (above) and yeshiva (below), 1984. (courtesy Y. Meital)

Figure 4: The Rambam synagogue, 1948 (courtesy Y. Meital)

What drove Jews from affluent suburbs to this place, Jews from Alexandria, maybe outside of Egypt, and even, the rumor has it, King Fuad through the proxy of his uniform? "Tradition has it that when Maimonides died, he was buried in the study room (*beit hamidrash*) in the synagogue courtyard, where he had taught (his remains were later reinterred in Tiberias). The small study room gradually became a pilgrimage site, and Jews and non-Jews alike came there to receive the blessing of Maimonides. Some would spend the entire night there."[38] According to Meital, the yeshiva has been a pilgrimage

[38] Meital, *op.cit.,* p. 13.

destination for a long time. My informants[39] could only remember testimonies dating back to the early 20th century. What is certain is that people seeking healing went specifically to this synagogue, which was imbued with a unique aura, that of Rambam's dead body. Judaism demands great reverence to the dead and their remains; it is not surprising that the reverence due to the deceased, and the respect due to sages such as Rambam endured in the sanctuary where he was briefly buried, and that his aura continued to inhabit the space. This reputation, combined to the folk knowledge that visitors were healed in this place, contributed to the aura of this specific synagogue. As Alan Morinis writes, "the pilgrimage center must achieve a reputation for having a unique character and offering something available at no other place with which it competes for patronage."[40] The space then becomes known as a special place of power, and turns into a point of convergence, a focal point, and a magnetic centripetal force.

While many holy sites of pilgrimage are located on a hill, pedestal or other elevation, Rambam's yeshiva is out of sight, in a backstreet and underground, requiring pilgrims to go down the stairs, into the belly of the building, into a room dimly light by cellar windows and a few oil lamps, where they would find an empty alcove and a pillow.

The non-descript space mirrored the ritual: a practice known to everybody, experienced by a majority of Egyptian Jews, but performed quietly, in the dark, in the heart of the ghetto. And yet, it was in the womb of the synagogue, next to Rambam's former grave, that pilgrims found comfort, confidence, hope, and healing. "It was like a cave," remembers Dinah Modiano, "but not a scary place." Moise Rahmani has strong

[39] Ginette Haboucha knows that her mother went to Rab Moshe as a toddler, around 1918.
[40] Morinis, *op.cit.*, p. 18.

memories of his annual visit to Rab Moshe with his mother in the 1940s and 1950s: “The smell was unique; it combined the leather of old prayer books and the oil from the lamps. Sixty years later, I still have it in my nostrils. It remains a powerful childhood memory.”[41]

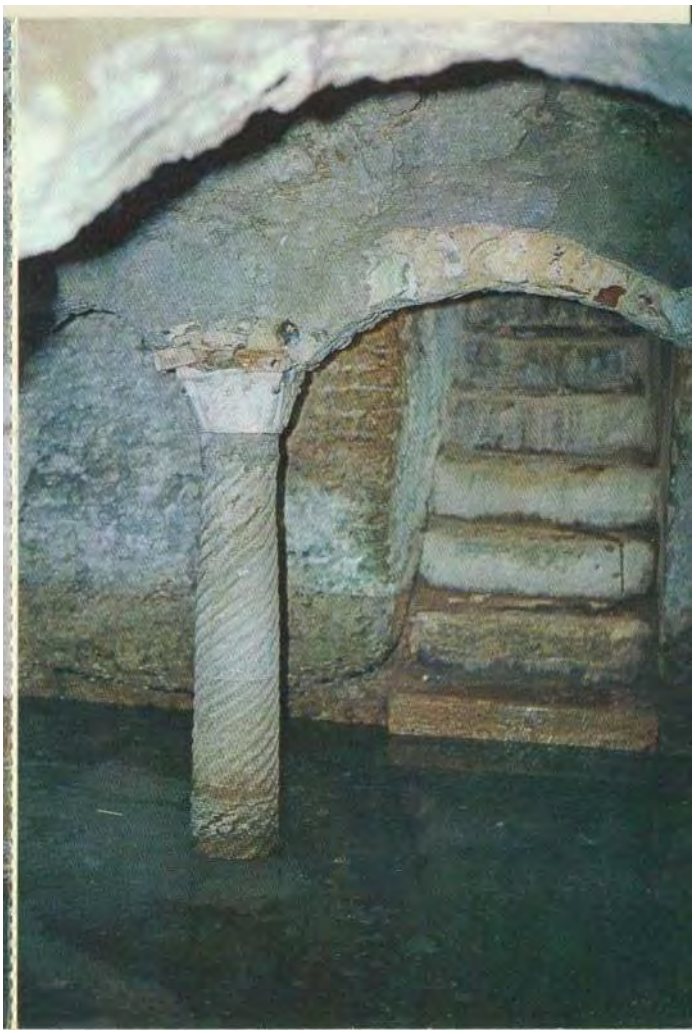

Figure 5: The yeshiva where the sick used to sleep (photo: Jamy Tivoli)

[41] Moïse Rahmani, personal phone interview, 19 October 2010.

The small space was bare, not decorated like the sanctuary upstairs; the alcoves were carved out of stonewalls, with simple pillows to protect the head against the cold stone. So, what made it sacred? As Lawrence Hoffman notes, "we create sacred sites of our own. Our maps of the sacred are thus a human recognition of the traces of God's presence on one hand and a road map of the human spirit at its finest on the other."[42] He then sums up: "Space is not given; we make it." In this case, not only did pilgrims and seekers make this site sacred by establishing a healing ritual there and by maintaining it on a daily basis; they also confirmed the efficacy of the site, or, in other words, its performative power. This is a sacred space that has an effect on people. The presence of the pilgrims in this place, the prayers they may utter *there*, their faith in Rambam who was buried *there* and will re-appear in the same location—these strong connections to the sacred space make the ritual efficacious. Its power resides in the aura attributed to the authentic space—authentic in relation to Rambam's life and holy powers. As Walter Benjamin noted, "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity…the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced."[43] The authenticity attributed to this space in which Rambam laid dead and continues to perform miracles creates a "felicitous" context (in J.L. Austin's sense) for the ritual to be efficacious. The physical descent into the cave, barefoot, parallels the experience of falling asleep, defenseless, like an infant, and entrusting Rambam with

[42] Lawrence A. Hoffman: *Sacred Places and the Pilgrimage of Life*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991, p. 15.
[43] Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken, 1968, p. 220.

one's life and restoration of health. As Victor Turner pointed out, "a pilgrim is one who divests himself of the mundane concomitants of religion—which become entangled with its practice in the local situation—to confront, in a special 'far' milieu, the basic elements and structures of his faith in their unshielded, virgin radiance."[44]

Sleeping in the cave means going into the underworld, literally and metaphorically; it means performing an individual ritual in a common space, since "dreams are the mediums for transmuting the public into the private, for using collective symbols to speak to the deepest levels of being,"[45] analyzed Barbara Myerhoff. In this case, dreaming of Rambam in Rambam's synagogue shows the interdependency of site-specificity and supernatural intercession—Rambam would not appear but in this place, and this place would not be holy without Rambam's miracles.

The healing can begin.

[44] Turner, *op.it.*, p. 16.
[45] Myerhoff, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

Chapter 4: The Performance of Healing

Hagiolatry, "the veneration of holy men and the performance of pilgrimages organized around their grave sites was an important part of popular piety in many parts of the Sephardi world, and most particularly in North Africa,"[46] writes Norman Stillman. While such practice is not immediately associated with Jewish ritual, the belief and veneration of miracle-working saints—long after their death—has been a fixture of Judaism. In fact, "reverence for the learned, respect for the dead, the distribution of charity, reading of liturgy and prayers for divine intercession refer as much to categories of uncontroversial Jewish practices as much as they are the phenomenological building blocks of saint veneration and pilgrimage."[47]

This fact begs the question, what is a saint or holy man in Judaism? According to Robert Cohn, "a saint is a type of religious authority who is both a model for imitation and an object of veneration."[48] But classical rabbinic Judaism never designated human beings worthy of special reverence or models of virtue. "The literary genre of hagiography is nearly absent from biblical and classical Jewish literature and appears only sporadically among later mystical groups… Those saint-like figures that Judaism has produced have emerged not from its classical rabbinic center but from its periphery,

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[46] Norman A. Stillman: *Sephardi Religious Responses to Modernity*. Luxembourg: Harwood, 1995, p. 73.
[47] Oren Kosansky: "Pilgrimage," in Norman A. Stillman (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010, vol. 4, p. 61.
[48] Robert L. Cohn: "Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism," in: John Stratton Hawley (ed.): *Saints and Virtues*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p. 87.

from forms of Judaism localized in time or place."[49] The periphery in this case means North Africa and Eastern European Hasidism.

Cohn details the reasons why Judaism mitigates against a tradition of saints. Salvation is not a personal goal but a collective one; "the idea of the saint as paradigm, by contrast, presupposes an individualistic form of piety."[50] Conversion is not central to Judaism as it is in Christianity, especially in the hagiography of saints. Most Jewish festivals commemorate national events, not individual achievements. He continues, "similarly, the *Siddur* devotes no petitions to individuals and recalls no individual lives."[51] Another challenge is the biblical ban on necromancy and contact with the dead. Finally, Judaism does not have the proper hierarchy to declare who is a saint and under which criteria. He concludes, "the very structure of Jewish religion and society discouraged the recognition of holy persons as models and icons. The primacy of the community over the individual in covenant and cult, the abhorrence of icons and the uncleanness of corpses, and the egalitarian nature of Jewish society all worked against the production of saints. Nevertheless, despite these limiting factors, certain individuals and groups of individuals in the history of Judaism may be construed as saintlike, given the impression they made on popular Jewish piety."[52]

Saints can be found among Biblical figures (patriarchs, matriarchs, Moses), martyrs (rabbi Akiva), mystics (rabbi Shimon bar Yohai), righteous men (tzaddikim), learned men (tamid chacham), or pious men (hassidim). Thanks to their virtuous lives

[49] *Ibid.,* p. 88.
[50] *Ibid.,* p. 89.
[51] *Ibid.,* p. 90.
[52] *Ibid.,* p. 92.

and their closeness to God in eternity, these saints act as intermediaries for human prayers to reach God. Rambam was considered such a saint, a saint who could facilitate the prayer of human beings and God's attending to them, particularly in cases of health and fertility.

At Rambam's the ritual was limited, if any, and informal. It started with drinking holy water from the well. "There was a well in the courtyard; we had to drink a sip of holy water," says Rahmani. "In retrospect, I call this naïve piety."[53] The water imbued with supernatural virtues does not strike as a Jewish ritual. However, when one remembers that Maimonides was a physician whose main professional activity was to heal people, one can compare the ritual taking place at the synagogue to a visit to the doctor, including taking in medication and listening to medical advice.

Pilgrims would then take off their shoes before entering the synagogue. The act of taking off one's shoes in a holy site is a sign of respect;[54] in this context, it is clearly an influence from the prevailing Islamic practice. It might also be a sign that Muslims did visit Rab Moshe (or "Maimuni," as he is known in Arabic) to receive his blessings, and that naturally took off their shoes upon entering, a practice that stuck. Once visitors descended to the dark underground chapel, they could see wicks burning in glasses filled with oil, which filled the room with a unique smell. These oil lamps served as memorial lights (the Sephardi equivalent of *Yahrzeit* candles), since Maimonides was briefly buried there. Writing about Jewish pilgrimage in Morocco, Oren Kosansky says, "Candles are a

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[53] Rahmani, *op. cit.*

[54] I have witnessed the same phenomenon in countryside synagogue outside Mumbai, India, where the B'nei Israel have been influenced by the Hindu and Muslim practice of entering a holy site barefoot.

common element of Jewish rituals… They function in a nexus of metaphors that unite saints, Holy Scriptures, and God—all of which are portrayed as fire and flame in pilgrimage talk and iconography. Flames also figure into the hagiography of saints, who are often depicted as studying sacred texts by candlelight late into the night."[55] The oil from the lamps was as holy as the water from the well. When the ailment was localized, people would dip a cotton ball in the oil, and rub it on the area of the body in need of healing. Again, this practice looks like medical advice, though the healing power is not intrinsic to the oil but to the holiness of the man and aura of the space in which the oil burns.

Then came the time to fall asleep, which was the core of the ritual. According to Sherwin Nuland, "the practice of sleeping in a sanctified retreat is at least as old as the pre-Hippocratic period of Greek civilization, when patients of all sorts came to the temples of the god Aesculapius, in the expectation that he would appear to them in a dream and provide the advice that, properly interpreted, would lead to the relief of their infirmities."[56]

This most passive posture is a metaphor for leaving it to Maimonides to act, for entrusting him with one's life, just like Jews entrust God with their lives upon falling asleep, with the hope of getting them back, rejuvenated in the morning. The Talmud (Berakhot 57b) states that "sleep is one sixtieth of death." Other traditions call sleep "a little death." In this context, the passivity of the sick—who is already physically disabled—emphasizes Rambam's powers. Full agency is given to Rambam, the long-

[55] Oren Kosansky: "Tourism, Charity, and Profit: The Movement of Money in Moroccan Jewish Pilgrimage," *Cultural Anthropology*, 17:3, 2002, pp.381-2
[56] Sherwin B. Nuland: *Maimonides*. New York: Schocken/Nextbook, 2005, p. 186.

dead physician, the holy man who can succeed when science has failed. Many pilgrims visited the healing place when they suffered from a rare or serious disease, often after seeing a myriad of doctors and specialists, or combining modern treatment and a visit to Rab Moshe. It could not hurt; it could also help. Rab Moshe was consulted when the famous professors were clueless, or when helpless patients needed a second opinion.

Rambam was not any physician. He was also a rabbi and scholar, as well as the public face of the Jewish community in Egypt. According to Lucien Perez, Maimonides could have made a living from teaching Torah, "but he was strongly opposed to the idea of doing business from religion, or to transmit his religious knowledge for money."[57] He turned to medicine for income, while studying Torah and writing his monumental works after hours. He learned medicine from Rabbi Hasadai Ibn Shaprut and Ben Ezra—who had been the physician of the King in Sevilla and Toledo. Upon immigrating in Egypt, Maimonides was appointed personal physician of Sultan Saladin, at the time when Saladin captured Jerusalem from the Christian Crusaders. Maimonides was also named *naguid*, the spiritual leader of the Jewish community of Egypt. He embodies all possible authorities in one: scientific knowledge, religious wisdom and piety, and community leadership.

There is not one topic not covered by Maimonides in his monumental scholarly work; magic is no exception. What is particularly interesting is that he addressed the issue both as a rabbi and as a physician. His scientific and religious knowledge often intersect in his writings, particularly in chapters dedicated to healing practices. In the

[57] Lucien Perez: "Maimonide, Symbole de l'espoir," *Mahar Misraïm*, no. 18-19, October 1985, p.33.

Guide of the Perplexed (3:37), he writes, "idolatry, belief in soothsayers, enchanters, sorcerers, and charmers … had marvelous and extraordinary effects on beings, whether these being a single individual or the population of a city. However, reasoning cannot judge nor can the intellect cognize as true these actions performed by magicians." This statement both informs us on the non-rabbinic practices that were common within the Jewish population, and on the fact that Maimonides condemned them. However, scholars who have studied his writings about magical healing practices have found more nuanced statements. Marc Shapiro notes that Maimonides was respectful of his colleagues, even in disagreement. When he "explains that the Sages permitted one to wear a fox tooth and similar healing devices that were connected to the idolatrous practices of the nations, not because they truly worked, but because in the days of the Sages these were commonly believed to have real healing power. The fact that Maimonides himself records this mishnaic ruling implies that even in his day people and doctors had faith in these folk remedies."[58] Shapiro further shows that in section 11:11 of *Avodah Zarah,* Maimonides lets someone recite a charm on behalf of someone else who has been bitten by a snake. Although he disapproves of the practice and does not believe that it will cure the man, he allows it since "it will prevent his mind from being disconcerted."[59] In other words, Maimonides embraced the placebo effect, and turns out to be a pragmatist, not a fundamentalist reader of Scriptures or medical treatises. This lucid attitude applied to his work as a physician, as a scholar, and as a community leader. His oath as a physician read as follows:

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[58] Marc B. Shapiro: *Studies in Maimonides and His Interpreters.* Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008, p. 141.
[59] Quoted in Shapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

> The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. May the love for my art actuate me at all time; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory or for a great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children.
>
> May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain.
> Grant me the strength, time and opportunity always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend its domain; for knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can extend indefinitely to enrich itself daily with new requirements.
> Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he can obtain a new light on what he thinks himself sure of today.
> Oh, God, Thou has appointed me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; here am I ready for my vocation and now I turn unto my calling.[60]

Rambam's humility and selflessness stand out of his oath, and show how his principles were guided both by faith and the reality of life, by Jewish law and human loving-kindness, by strictness and pragmatism. As he helped rescue spiritually the community in Yemen, "word of his beneficence reached other parts of the Jewish world; the reputation of Moses was further enhanced. He was seen not only as a comforter of the distressed, but as a sage who had incorporated the most significant principles of Judaism into the letter."[61] Nuland describes the scope of Rambam's reputation in the most praiseful terms. And yet, towards the end of his biography, after pointing to Rambam's pragmatic view on magical remedies, he concludes, "there is a bittersweet irony in the fact that Maimonides, who railed against superstitions of all sorts, should be the object of this one. His is the greatest legend of postbiblical Judaism, and to certain of those whose

[60] http://guides.library.jhu.edu/content.php?pid=23699&sid=190571 (accessed 12/20/2010)
[61] Nuland, *op.cit.,* p. 5.

faith is expressed beyond the bonds of normative theology, his ghostly intercession can accomplish anything. For them, it makes no difference that the real Rambam would have condemned the rituals carried out in his name, even as he repeatedly condemned astrology, amulets, and all such practices that have no basis in reason for the Law. Those who seek his help in these ways are not only fearful and credulous, they are also ignorant of the man and his works. Beyond the legend, he has become a myth."[62]

This blunt criticism is disturbing on many counts. After showing Rambam's nuanced and open-minded attitude towards folk practices, Nuland—who is a physician—lashes against such practices, but turns a blind eye to the concept of popular religion (and rabbinic laissez-faire), cultural specificities of Jews from Egypt (including their limited Jewish knowledge), and the psychological support that such folk beliefs bring to someone in need of healing when science has reached the limit, but human nature is still hoping for a cure. As for Maimonides becoming a "myth," he achieved this status long ago; the fact that he is considered a saint is a positive way to acknowledge his encyclopedic wisdom, his dedication to his people, his professional integrity, his selflessness, and his legacy.

Maimonides' legacy went far beyond the Jewish community. He died on December 13, 1204 and, "according to legend, as the funeral procession was going through the desert, it was attacked by a band of Bedouins. As soon as the robbers realized that they were about to desecrate the body of Maimonides, they refrained from their assault and hung their heads in shame. Forming a protective circle around the funeral cortege, they followed it all the way to the burial place in Palestine. For Maimuni, as they

[62] *Ibid.,* p. 187.

called him, was a man they all revered. Many times he had treated them for their illnesses without asking for pay for his services."[63]

After examining the healing ritual associated with the figure of Rambam, we see that it is very similar to the powers attributed to Christian saints and Muslim healers, or "marabouts." "They are persons, living or dead, to whom is attributed a special relation towards God which makes them particularly well-placed to serve as intermediaries with the supernatural and to communicate God's grace (*baraka*) to their clients…. A concrete indication of this is the proliferation of maraboutic shrines throughout the Maghreb."[64] When I asked Ginette Haboucha about her experience at Rab Moshe's, she spontaneously said, "Rab Moshe was our marabout!"[65]

Both *tzaddikim* and *marabouts* are believed to have powers to cure, perform other miracles, "and to shelter their adherents with their all-encompassing blessing, called *baraka*. They possess an unlimited quantity of *baraka* that can be distributed at will among their devotees."[66] The main quality of the *baraka* is that it is for everybody. As Josef Meri confirms, in his analysis of saints in the medieval Syria, "studies of saints in non-Christian contexts have all too often assumed the centrality of Christian paradigms. Expressions such as 'cult of saint,' 'saint,' 'hagiography,' 'sainthood,' and 'praesentia'… have distinctly Christian meanings. However, these and other concepts essentially

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[63] Moses Maimonides: *Shemonah Perakim: A Treatise on the Soul*, trans. and comm. by Leonard Kravitz and Kerry Olitzky. New York: UAHC Press, 1999, p. 129.
[64] Alex Weingrod: "Saints and Shrines, Politics, and Culture: A Morocco-Israel Comparison." In Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (eds.): *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 220.
[65] Phone interview with Ginette Haboucha, 27 September 2010.
[66] Gitlitz, *op. cit.* p. 127.

correspond to certain shared aspects of saint veneration. Muslims, Christians, and Jews visited each other's shrines in Syria and elsewhere. … 'Sainthood' merely refers to the state and condition by which one is designated a saint, irrespective of the process."[67] Meri understands the phenomenon as follows: "the veneration of saints serves as an example of the relatively harmonious relations that existed between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in the Near East."[68] It is unclear whether we can call this convergence in veneration a form of syncretism, though Meri asserts, "*ziyara* (lit. a visit, visitation), the Arabic word for pilgrimage and visiting sacred places, was a multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced by geography and local custom as well as by religious tradition."[69] If so, did Jews influence Muslims or vice-versa? Gitlitz claims, "although some Muslim holy tombs attracted Jewish pilgrims, much more numerous were the tombs of Jewish tzadiqim venerated as well by the Muslim community. In the 1940s in Morocco more than thirty renowned Jewish tombs attracted dual devotion. In Tangier, Muslims would bring their children to the tomb of Abraham Toledano to protect them against diphtheria." [70] In Morocco alone, there are "more than 600 saints and their shrines, including dozens that were equally claimed and revered by both Muslims and Jews."[71]

If we return to our case study, we could then assume that non-Jews went to Rab Moshe's to obtain his blessing. King Fuad (1868-1936) is rumored to have gone to Rab Moshe or to have sent his uniform as a proxy. My informants had contradictory opinions

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[67] Josef Meri: *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 5.
[68] *Ibid.,* p. 4.
[69] *Ibid.,* p. 5
[70] Gitlitz, *op. cit.* p. 130.
[71] Weingrod, *op. cit.,* p. 220.

on the issue. Fortunée Ambar claims, "they had their saints, and we had ours," while André Sharon is convinced that Muslims and Christians went to the synagogue in need of blessings. What is certain is that many Jews came accompanied with a maid—in most cases, a Muslim person—who was then aware of the ritual and the healing power of the place. Whether Rab Moshe's underground chapel was visited by non-Jews remains an open question; what is certain is that this Jewish practice had a lot in common with Christian and Muslim veneration of saints and belief in their supernatural powers.

From a social perspective, however, the healing ritual performed in the Middle East fed on the modernization process. As Harvey Goldberg notes, "the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of pilgrimage sites in North Africa in the wake of social and demographic shifts."[72] In Cairo, the migration of the Jewish population away from the Jewish quarter did not decrease pilgrimage to Rambam's synagogue. This folk ritual also resisted attacks within the Jewish world. "As post-Enlightenment trends of European secularism and Jewish Orthodoxy penetrated the increasingly colonized Islamic world, pilgrimage to saints' tombs came under revitalized attack as a heterodox and superstitious form of popular religion."[73] Neither social mobility, nor the progress of science, nor critical comments from Orthodox or Reformist Jews diminished healing practices *chez* Rab Moshe. In fact, as Cairo was becoming a big cosmopolitan and busy city, as Egyptian Jews fell for the sirens of Western culture and assimilation, and as the political situation grew uncertain, I would even argue that Jews clung all the more to folk rituals

[72] Harvey E. Goldberg: *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 27.
[73] Oren Kosansky: "Pilgrimage," in Norman A. Stillman (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010, vol. 4, p. 60.

that anchored their identity, strenghtened their sense of belonging, and fulfilled an emotional and spiritual need. At the same time, like other pilgrimage sites in North Africa, Rambam's synagogue benefited from modernization as well, most notably from the development of the printing press for mass production. The dissemination of Rambam's portrait, replicated on small cards or posters, contributed to the popularity of the site and of his miraculous powers.

Chapter 5: Rab Moshe as Icon

Sites of pilgrimage with a reputation for miraculous healing rely on physical objects used on premises, such as oil lamps, cotton balls soaked in oil, and charity boxes. The latter participated in an economy of ritual that is common in Jewish practice that can be understood as payment for a service—the various tasks performed by the *shamash* in charge of the chapel—or the *mitzvah* of giving to the poor, or the additional sacrifice made out of gratefulness for Rambam's intercession. These objects—light, oil, and charity—have always been part of Jewish ritual across time and across the Diaspora.

Fig. 6: Candle, cotton and sugar dipped in oil from Rambam's tomb, Tiberias (Coll F. Ambar)

In an economy of pilgrimage, however, material culture is exchanged both ways: the objects that pilgrims bring with them, such as money, and those objects that pilgrims take home with them, such as the cotton ball or the sugar lump soaked in oil, or visual portraits of the saint they came to honor. "Among both Sephardic Jews and Muslims, baraka is also conceived of at times as a physical substance, present at and removable from the holy site. The tzadiq's and marabout's baraka resides in everything that comes in contact with the holy place."[74]

Rambam is no exception. I have seen wallet-size portraits of Rambam (a reduced version from the poster kept by my great-aunt) that relatives had collected at Rab Moshe's and kept throughout exile in Europe and the United States. Mass-reproduced on cheap cardboard, they represent the iconic face of the rabbi, with turban, beard, medal and signature in Hebrew or in Arabic or both. The existence of such images is surprising in relation to the long tradition of aniconism in Judaism, based on a very restrictive interpretation of the Second Commandment that bans "any graven images." Richard Cohen, who examined rabbinic portraits in modern Western Europe, argues that the wide dispersion of such images is both a sign of modernity, thanks to advanced printing techniques, and a sign of decreasing tension between Judaism and Christianity. His analysis of the transformation of the rabbi into an icon is most relevant to the case of Rambam. He details three reasons for the success of the mass production of vignettes. The first portraits that have come down to us—those of Sephardic figures—date back to sixteenth-century Italy. Jews would "preserve a portrait of the venerable rabbi as an act of

[74] Gitlitz, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

respect and as a way of safeguarding his image in their minds."[75] Rambam is represented as a paternal, soothing figure that inspires respect and affection. Rabbinic images go against the ban on human representation; the portrait thus functions as an entry point into modernity that distances itself from restrictive interpretation of aniconism. Another attribute of the printed image is to recreate a "unique personal impression upon seeing the painting of a revered figure,"[76] just like looking at the photograph of a deceased person triggers fond memories. In such cases, the image acts as a *memento*, in the literal sense of "reminder" of the subject that is represented.

Finally, in the context of the veneration of saints, such appropriation of the portrait is "similar to the way individuals in medieval or modern pilgrimages are motivated to walk away from a particular shrine with souvenirs or to create images that rekindle the memory and reality of their experience."[77] The powerful effect of the image is not limited to remembering the rabbi reproduced on it; it prolongs the effect of the religious experience. The portrait becomes a talisman, extending its power upon the return to one's house. One wonders at the idea that a cheap, mass-reproduced cardboard picture can have such meaning. Cohen explains, "as long as the portrait fulfilled the image the beholder had of the figure, it secured its authentic function."[78] In other words, the value and power of such portraits is in the eye of the (be)holder, who imbues the material object with mystical meaning. "For the beholders of the amuletic portrait the aspirations and implications were clear, similar to the way Christian images in earlier

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[75] Richard I. Cohen: *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 118.
[76] *Ibid.* p. 120.
[77] *Ibid.*, p. 122.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 125.

periods served the Christian population and the way a rabbi's grave or holy place held a special aura for Jews over the centuries: the rabbinic figures, who had long passed away, could continue to shower blessings and protection."[79] Hagiographic portraits of rabbis were thus a common phenomenon, in Europe and the Middle East. "Within this genre the figure of Maimonides loomed large and received much attention. Already in the eighteenth century a version of the 'Maimonides' portrait was published in a volume dealing with sacred antique artifacts and was claimed to have been appropriated from an antique medial that has never been discovered. Maimonides appears in stately fashion. Sporting a turban and a well-groomed beard, he presents a distinguished look; a medal hangs from a long chain around his neck. With several slight variations this was to become the accepted portrait of Maimonides and to appear in a wide variety of objects during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[80] At the time of mass reproduction, Rambam's portrait acquired a fourth function, that of a commodity with a mystical value that could have an impact on everyday life.

Just like the underground space where people slept was imbued with Rambam's aura and thus became performative of transformation, the portrait acquires the same performative quality that allows for the effect of the mystical encounter to be felt long after the pilgrimage is completed. The fact that both space and image share this quality echoes Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where he wrote, "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 144-5.

uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction."[81] It is irrelevant that Maimonides died in 1204 and that any physical representation of him is probably an idealized construct and a distortion of his actual likeness. The image might even belong to another figure, even if his handwritten signature stands below his portrait, as a marker of authenticity. The aura of the portrait, even in a cheap reproduction, offers an "intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment,"[82] thus fulfilling the function of any "authentic" object.

For the pilgrim, the reproduced portrait of Rambam is a proof of "being there," in that sacred space where miracles occur, a portable and physical extension of Rambam's healing powers and an acknowledgement of faith in him. The mass reproduction of such wallet-size portraits corresponds to a number of social development in the Jewish community of Egypt in the first part of the 20th century: the weakening of traditional society in favor of modernity, the search for ideal figures and role models at a time of uncertain leadership, and the need for a more personal, meaningful and comforting spiritual experience at a time of increased rationalism, urban alienation, and assimilation.

[81] Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken, 1968, p. 223.
[82] *Ibid.,* p. 234.

Chapter 6: Politics, Renovation, and Tourism

Starting 1956, when Jews were forced to leave Egypt, the Rambam synagogue was eventually deserted. The alcoves remained empty, and the oil lamps stopped burning. Soon, Rab Moshe had no more sick people to visit in their sleep. The portable mementos—the reproduction of Rambam's portrait—was the only physical tie to the site that Jews would not be able to visit anymore. Spiritual connections with Rab Moshe would continue with the proxy of his portrait or objects soaked in holy oil, as my great-aunt Fortunée has been doing for 60 years, and similar healing rituals are taking place at Rambam's gravesite in Tiberias, Israel.

Meanwhile, the small synagogue of Haret el-Yahud closed; its roof collapsed, the well overflowed, and there were three feet of water in the building. Pigeons had invaded the place, and skinny goats were grazing in the courtyard. "The view was heart-breaking,"[83] recalls Moïse Rahmani, who returned to the site in the 1980s. "I managed to salvage some prayer books in Judeo-Arabic." For decades, the synagogue was in ruin, abandoned, except for the annual visit of Israeli Lubavitchers studying Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, who would celebrate the completion of a book by traveling to Cairo and pray at the site (as soon as the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt allowed such travels). Given the irreversible decline of the Jewish community of Egypt—totaling a handful of elderly people that barely constitute a *minyan*—the hope of seeing the Rambam synagogue active again remained wishful thinking.

[83] Moïse Rahmani, *op. cit.*,

Figure 7: The Sanctuary of Rambam's Synagogue in 1993 (courtesy Y. Meital)

Until a combination of political, historical, and social factors brought the abandoned building under the spotlight again, some fifty years later. In 2007, the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosny, was a candidate to the position of director general of UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Hosny has been Minister of Culture since 1987. During his tenure, he has boasted the renovation of numerous sites of national heritage in Egypt; he is also notorious for making anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli statements, including threatening to "burn all books in Hebrew in the Alexandria library."[84] An intense lobbying campaigned ensued until the election in September 2009. Many commentators attribute the renovation of the Rambam synagogue (as well as the main synagogue, Shaarei Shamayim, and the

[84] See http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6391201.ece (accessed 15 January 2011)

promise to restore others) to a political strategy to secure the vote from Israel and from Western countries, via the support of Egyptian Jews living in France, the U.K. and the U.S. Hosny prides himself of being the initiator or the director of major renovations of monuments, including churches, synagogues and museums.[85]

At the same time, a number of Jewish organizations—"Justice for Jews from the Arab World," "Nebi Daniel Association," and other groups of Jewish exiles—multiplied contacts with the Jewish community, headed by Carmen Weinstein, in order to preserve, access, and highlight the Jewish heritage of Egypt—synagogues, cemeteries, archives, and other material traces of the past. Yves Fedida, founder of Nebi Daniel in 2002, insists on "taking into account the political reality and Egyptian sensitivity. The goal is not to reclaim synagogues or artifacts and to transfer them to Europe or the United States. Our goal is to assist with the preservation efforts and accessibility of the heritage in Egypt."[86] The renovation of Rambam's synagogue was one of the projects that this organization supported.

According to Edwin Shuker, a past president of Justice for Jews from the Arab World, the idea of renovating the Rambam synagogue was, for the Egyptians, "part political, part bridge-building, and part excitement."[87] The third factor is affective. Along with other Jews who travel to Egypt frequently, Shuker has witnessed a surge of interest for things Jewish—books, documentaries, films in Arabic. A similar trend is visible in other Arab capitals that used to host a sizeable Jewish community: Beirut is restoring the

[85] See his website, http://www.faroukhosny.com/ (accessed 15 January 2011).
[86] Phone interview with Yves Fedida, 19 November 2010.
[87] Phone interview with Edwin Shuker, 28 September 2010.

Magen Avraham synagogue in the Wadi Jamil quarter,[88] Damascus is turning its own Haret el-Yahud, the old Jewish quarter, into luxury hotels and elegant mansions,[89] and the Iraqi religious authority, the *wakf*, plans a massive renovation of the prophet Ezekiel in Al-Kifl as a site of Muslim pilgrimage.[90]

Questions arise; are these massive renovation projects motivated by historic preservation or political calculation? Do these sites remain Jewish after they are cleaned up, or turned into public spaces with sheer architectural value? Do the revamped buildings generate genuine interest and nostalgic memories from Jewish visitors to fuel "roots tourism" or "heritage trails" to the Arab capitals that they were forced to leave?

The situation is different in Morocco and Tunisia, where the small remaining community, together with the government, is actively promoting Jewish pilgrimage sites to Jews from the Diaspora, and live off religious tourism to the tombs of saints, synagogues and cemeteries. Concerted marketing efforts have blurred the line between pilgrimage and tourism that target the Moroccan Diaspora. In Egypt, Israeli pilgrims flock to Damanhur, the 19th-century gravesite of Rabbi Abu-Hacira, but only after "Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak last year acceded to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's request to permit the pilgrimage and festival… Egypt's Supreme

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[88] Ksenia Svetlova: "Restoration in Cairo and Beirut," *The Jerusalem Post*, November 4, 2010. http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/Article.aspx?id=193984 (accessed 15 January 2011)
[89] Ksenia Svetlova: "Jewish Quarter of Damascus blooms again," *The Jerusalem Post*, November 5, 2010. http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/Article.aspx?id=193983
[90] http://www.diarna.org/wordpress/Diarnawp/wordpress/uncategorized/january-2010-%E2%80%93-ezekiel%E2%80%99s-tomb-digitally-mapping-precious-sites-before-it-is-too-late/

Administrative Court recently upheld a lower court decision to ban the event made in 2001."[91]

Another equivocal issue in Egypt is the contradictory attitude of Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, who is seen on many public relations videos saying in English, "Jewish temples are part of our history. If we don't care about Jewish temples, we don't care about our history, and who boasts about the renovation of the synagogues?"[92] And yet, on other public occasions, he has said, in Arabic, "Jews went to America and took control of the economy. They have a plan. Although they are few in number, they control the entire world."[93] With a minister of culture and a minister of antiquities blowing hot and cold on matters of Jewish heritage in Egypt, it is not surprising that the dedication of the renovated synagogue created controversy.

In fact, there were supposed to be two ceremonies, a Jewish one, on 7 March 2010, and an official one in presence of the Egyptian authorities on 13 March 2010, which corresponded to Maimonides' birthday. The first event took place under heavy security, with policemen and other security officers outnumbering the 150 guests—a few Jews still living in Egypt, some exiles who flew back from Europe and the United States, and some Israelis, including all former ambassadors to Egypt and a group of Lubavitchers

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[91] "Israeli pilgrims in Egypt amid tight security," *JTA*, December 27, 2010 http://jta.org/news/article/2010/12/27/2742330/israeli-pilgrims-in-egypt-amid-tight-security (accessed 27 December 2010)

[92] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PW1R_HEEs8&NR=1&feature=fvwp (accessed 10 November 2010)

[93] 11 February 2009, Egyptian television http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h71xCCyTJGY&feature=player_embedded

who study Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* on a daily basis.[94] Things turned sour at the end of the ceremony, when the Lubavitchers started singing and dancing amongst themselves, drank liquor and offered some to the (Muslim) police officers.[95] This behavior showed no respect for *minhag hamakom*—the local traditions of Egyptian Jews—or for the rules of the land. Such outrageous images reached the authorities at the same time as news reports showed Palestinians riot against Israeli policemen on the Temple Mount; both sets of images served as an excellent pretext to have the official ceremony canceled. "The Egyptian government has announced that it will not allow Jews to pray in Cairo's newly-restored Maimonides synagogue… A Qatari newspaper quoted Hawass saying the Maimonides Synagogue would be treated as an Egyptian antiquity, not a Jewish house of worship."[96] The Egyptian government renovated the synagogue on its own dime, refusing foreign financial support, including from Egyptian Jews, but it remained conspicuously absent from the Jewish ceremony and canceled its own showcasing of "Egyptian heritage."

The synagogue has been closed to the public since its dedication in March 2010. Various visitors who attempted to visit have been barred from entering it. Hawass promised that Jews would not be allowed to pray in the synagogue, and locked it. Given the current situation, one wonders what this space has become. It is a Jewish historical site, but not an active synagogue or yeshiva. It is a renovated building, but closed to the

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[94] See images of the dedication here http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd_B9NeNF0Y&feature=related (accessed 10 November 2010)

[95] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19sKR1QgUI4&feature=related

[96] Hana Levi Julian: "Jews Barred from Cairo's Maimonides Synagogue," *Arutz Sheva*, 28 March 2010. http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/news.aspx/136755

public. It is presented as a site of Egyptian heritage, but it is not meant to be visited. It is a Jewish site, but under the operation of the Egyptian government. It was a pilgrimage destination, now it is not even a tourism destination. It could be an asset for Cairo's image, but there is no printed materials or other form of publicity that tell the story. It used to be a center that attracted pilgrims from the periphery; now it attracts neither local Jews nor those in the Diaspora. Rambam's aura left the chapel when Jews left Cairo. What is it, then? Some yet-to-be-completed tourism destination that could generate income and interest if it was open regularly? Some nostalgic construct meant to engage and move Jews from Egypt and elsewhere ? A selling point via Rambam's name and image? According to Edwin Shuker, it is better to see a museum than a restaurant replacing a synagogue; it is better to maintain a presence rather than erase Jewish heritage completely.[97]

From the outside, one can see the exterior façade and the name of Maimonides in Arabic and Hebrew: "The Synagogue and Shrine of al-Sayyid Musa Ibn Maymun HaRambam."

[97] Edwin Shuker, *op. cit.*

Figure 8: Entrance to the (closed) synagogue. November 2010 (photo: Daniel Stolz)

The combination of political opportunism, Diaspora lobbying, and idealized memories of past coexistence have led the Egyptian government to restore this Jewish landmark. This process has been transformative from Jewish ownership to Egyptian heritage, from active synagogue to exhibition objects and from pilgrimage to (potential) tourism. The renovated synagogue also tries to bank on the nostalgic surge of memoirs[98], films[99], and other cultural productions focusing on the golden age of Egyptian Jewry.

[98] See among others, Lucette Lagnado: *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: My Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World.* New York: HarperCollins, 2007; Joyce Zonana: *Dream Homes.* New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2008; Jean

What will happen to Rab Moshe's synagogue remains to be seen. The Egyptian Jewish community is under tight surveillance, and is dwindling. The Egypt-born Jews in the Diaspora who have maintained traditions and memories are in their sixties, but mostly older; their connection is loose. The public opening of the renovated Rambam synagogue depends on the goodwill of the authorities, not on the Jewish community. The Nebi Daniel Association recently suggested to Minister Hawass setting up a permanent exhibit about Maimonides, so as to maintain the site open for visits on a regular basis.

Meanwhile, in Tiberias, Israel, Rambam's grave is visited daily; the folk ritual has been framed within the Orthodox rules that govern the site: there is a high and long *mechitza* running over Rambam's above-ground tomb, so as to segregate male and female visitors. This cemetery is clearly a Jewish site, of Orthodox obedience. Rambam's healing powers are still recognized and pilgrims converge to under-developed and poor Tiberias mainly for this reason. Material objects that help the ritual generate income—the candles, the dipping of cotton or sugar in holy oil; the portraits of Rambam participate in an economy of keepsakes and charity. Next door, the "Maimonides Heritage Center" was built in 2003, with a "vision of turning this place into a center for study, education, tourism, and inspiration... and to transform the surrounding area of Maimonides' grave and the entire city of Tiberias into a place befitting the legacy of the 'Great Eagle' HaRambam."[100]

Naggar: *Sipping from the Nile: My Exodus from Egypt*. Stone Ridge, NY: Stony Creek Press, 2008.

[99] Dan Wolman: *Yolande, an Unsung Heroin*, DVD, 2010, 60 min. is one of the most recent examples.

[100] http://www.mhcny.org/?page=ourstory (accessed 20 January 2011)

Cairo, Tiberias. Rab Moshe and Maimonides. Folk faith and Orthodox Judaism. Pilgrimage and tourism. A closed synagogue and a fenced gravesite. Rambam still has a lot of healing to perform.

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