

***Bilad Al Haqaniya?: Otherness and Homeland  
in the Case of Djerban, Tunisian Jewry***

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Naomi Stone, Oxford University, 2006

*Yerushalayim yetawasalni, fil ghenah, wa fil biyoot*  
Jerusalem will come to me, in the song, and in the home<sup>1</sup>

*Yerushaliyim biladna haqaniya*  
Jerusalem is our true country<sup>2</sup>

The Fall of the First Temple, 586 B.C., Jerusalem

The priests buzzed around the nothing  
that was left there, inspecting it with  
itching fingers. One threw the useless  
keys into the everything above. Now,

they would learn to make  
a meadow a temple, an act or an absence of  
an act, a temple. They weep and then  
they learn to be  
an altar<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt of Tunisian Jewish folksong, sung by Louisa Boucharis in Moshav Betigadi, Israel. August 2005. Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt of Tunisian Jewish folksong, sung by Shoshana Cohen in Netivot, Israel. August 2005. Translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> By Nomi Stone, written on Poetry Fulbright in Djerba Tunisia, 2003-4.

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE QUESTION OF HOME

### **Introduction and Methodology**

Do the Jews of Djerba, Tunisia<sup>4</sup> perceive themselves to be in exile, even though they have perhaps resided on the island for over 2000 years? To what degree is Djerba now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *home* for the Djerban Jews? Have their notions of home changed after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948? In the subsequent thesis, I will examine otherness and homeland in the case of Djerban Jewry in the modern Middle East. In so doing, I necessarily discuss the historical, cultural and religious background of the community and that of its surroundings. The process is a descriptive, ethnographic study of one Jewish community—and its evolution—in the region; the result is a grappling with the question of home and how it may be understood by the community over time.

In the last fifty years, eighty percent of Djerban Jews have emigrated to Israel or France.<sup>5</sup> Djerba's Jewish population crested at 5-6,000 in the mid forties; it plummeted between 1948 and 1967. There are now approximately 1,200 Jews within a population of 100,000 Muslims (mostly of Berber origin and either Sunnis or belonging to the strict Ibadi sect of Islam<sup>6</sup>) on the island; they reside in *Hara Kebira* and *Hara Sgheira*, “the large and small Jewish quarters.” In the same period, Tunisia's general Jewish population fell from 100,000 to under 10,000. These figures reflect a general trend throughout the Middle East. At

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<sup>4</sup> Djerba is located in the Gulf of Gabes, off the coast of Tunisia and has an area of 510 square kilometers with a population just over 100,000. Its capital is Houmt Souq.

<sup>5</sup> Northern Tunisians typically emigrated to France, having attended French schools under the Protectorate. Southern Tunisians (especially Djerbans), had resisted foreign secular influence and kept their young in traditional yeshivot, more generally emigrating to Israel.

<sup>6</sup> Deshen, 1997. Ibadis have been historically most prominent on the island, though in recent decades, Sunni Muslims have become a more substantial element. The Tunisian government publishes no exact statistics. However, Ibadi presence and legacy on Djerba are generally emphasized by Djerbans and other Tunisians in describing the character of Djerban Islam.

this same time, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Morocco and Turkey were nearly emptied of their respective longstanding<sup>7</sup> Jewish populations due to emigration to Israel and elsewhere. Most histories contend that the Jews left in tandem with various political crises in the Middle East. I will argue that in addition, perhaps *a shifted conception of home* after 1948 created for the Djerban Jews their own *unbelonging* in Djerba. I will make the case that the remaining fragment of Djerban Jews have sought to maintain the Jewish aspect of their identities at the expense of the Djerban aspect, whereas previously, perhaps both aspects could comfortably coexist without contradiction. This shift was likely experienced by many such Jewish communities scattered through the region, however I confine my study to Djerba.

I define identity in the sense of David Snow's collective identity: "a shared and interactive sense of *we-ness*;"<sup>8</sup> my interest is in *how* and *with whom* Djerban Jews identify themselves, and if this has changed over time.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, this shared sense of *we-ness* is constituted by "shared perceptions of a common cause, threat or fate" and is "anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of 'others.'"<sup>10</sup> For Djerban Jews, relation to and distinction from the Muslim Other is integral to the community's Self. I use the term "myth" throughout the thesis referring simply to a people's overarching beliefs about themselves and their position in the universe. My working definition for "belonging" is a psychological sense of feeling oneself to be in the right place,

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<sup>7</sup> Some North African Jewish communities (such as Djerba) predate the Islamic conquest. Saadoun, 444.

<sup>8</sup> Snow, 1.

<sup>9</sup> In the case of Egyptian Jewry, Beinun asks "whether Egyptian Jews saw themselves and were seen by others as 'Egyptians' or as 'Jews.'" (5) I frame the question of identity thus for Tunisian Jews, examining felt identification with a group or with one group in definition against another.

<sup>10</sup> Snow, 2.

at ease in a broader group. I define *at home* as “at one's ease, as if in one's own home; in one's element; unconstrained, unembarrassed; familiar or conversant *with*, well versed *in*.”<sup>11</sup> I investigate to what degree, over the course of the twentieth century, Djerban Jews have felt “at home” in their birthplace, and the possibility of simultaneous embracing of two homes.

In this paper, I rely on feelings of attachment to or detachment from *Djerba*, as opposed to broader sentiments around Tunisia. My focus here is on the community's psychological sense of belonging in Djerba—a location they have resided for perhaps two millennia— rather than on Jewish identifications with the Tunisia emerging in 1956 as a nation *per se*. Tunisia's emergence, with its specifically Arab character, perhaps alienated the Djerban Jews; at this time, they were lured by Zionist rhetoric, a point I will develop further.

I situate the dual and ambivalent identity—of Jew, and of Djerban—within a historical political framework of the creation of the State of Israel. There is evidence to show that the events of 1948 caused a shift in the community's psyche. Exile, at one time likely abstractly understood, shifted to a *newly-born, concrete* sense of actual displacement within Djerba, which perhaps *did not exist* in the same way previously. Whereas once the Jews had identified Djerba as home, and felt their belonging within it, in the new paradigm, notions of home were ascribed more exclusively to Israel. I examine theories of "Negation of Exile" and of Zionist collective memory to better understand how identification with Djerba may have been trumped by other identifications for the Djerban Jews.

In my second chapter, I examine *daily* interactions and perceptions as a prism on the belonging of the Djerban Jews. I compare my fieldwork in Djerba from 2003-5 (group and

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<sup>11</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1989.

individual interviews and informal conversations)<sup>12</sup> to a series of interviews I conducted amongst Djerban emigrants in Israel who left Tunisia in the early 1950s. In the latter case, I am culling early or family memories to get a sense of pre-1948 Djerba. I examine commercial and religious coexistence, and friendships between the two groups to gauge the Djerban Jews' relative belonging or alienation within Djerba. I also use a variety of secondary sources (travel logs, ethnographies, histories) delineating the relationship between Muslims and Jews in Djerba, and its shift in the twentieth century, to contextualize my fieldwork and to substantiate my claims.

In the third chapter, my focus shifts from daily interactions to investigate *rituals*, which I understand as heightened dramas enacting the community's collective identity, and the paradigms these dramas offer. I analyze local Djerban Jewish particularities of the festivals of Purim and Lag B'Omer as windows on the community's struggle to maintain both its unique Jewish identity and its Djerban identity. I examine the rituals as part of a broader cosmology structuring the Djerban Jewish universe. Each festival contends with the boundaries of the Jews with the Muslim population, the possibility of "belonging" in Djerba, and if the island is, or can be "home" for the Jews. I read Purim and Lag b'Omer as historical continuities, enacting Jewish ambivalence in their Muslim environment throughout time; my fieldwork analyzes the shape the rituals take in 2003-5.

Ultimately, the Jews of Djerba are one microcosm for the larger region: the collision of Western imperialism, Arab Nationalism, Zionism and secularizing influence of the tourism industry with a deeply traditional, insular island culture mirrors the larger issues

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<sup>12</sup> I lived in Djerba from February-May 2004. Between September 2003 and February 2004, I made frequent visits. I returned in April 2005. As the community is composed of Orthodox Jewish who adhere to gender separation, the bulk of my interviews are of females. I further elaborate on the problems of my fieldwork in the subsequent chapter.



affecting the Middle East, but has had specific reverberations in Djerba. Mary Douglas asserts that communities construct barriers between themselves and the forces that threaten them through taboo, or the “spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe,” which “protects local consensus on how the world is organized.”<sup>13</sup> Such taboos have structured how Djerban Jews relate to that which exists outside of their own community’s core. The Jewish community seems to feel besieged from *both* the exterior (by Muslim and imported Western influences) and equally, from the interior (by impurity, and fear of succumbing to outside influences). For the Jews of Djerba, the Other is often understood as the embodiment of danger, threatening dissolution of the community’s Self.<sup>14</sup> On some levels, the community is dealing creatively with new challenges and adapting slowly. However, ultimately these outside forces have driven an already closed community more anxiously into itself, challenging the *belonging* of the Jews within Djerba. I ultimately argue that the remaining Jews in Djerba seek to maintain one part of their identity, perhaps at the expense of the other.

### **Messianic Leanings of the Jews of Djerba**

Awaiting a Messiah to eliminate exile and usher in redemption has been integral to Judaism since the second Temple period. According to Mircea Eliade, Messianism seeks to “abolish history” (or more precisely, its grievances): “When the Messiah comes, the world

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas, xi.

<sup>14</sup> The most profound taboo for the Jewish community has often been understood as intermarriage; reproduction of the community depended on certain boundaries with the majority population. Udovitch, 57. Although in Islam, due to patrilineality, marriage between a dhimmi (non Muslim) woman and a Muslim man is acceptable, intermarriage in all forms is taboo for the Djerban Jews.

will be saved once and for all and history will cease to exist.”<sup>15</sup> This sequence of events is imagined to occur in Israel; for Djerban Jews, with their profound messianism, Israel has long been intertwined with a mythical age to come. Jerusalem has been understood as the navel of the world,<sup>16</sup> the emotional and imaginative core sustaining the larger Jewish community in Diaspora. Eliade emphasizes that the drive in religion to *return* to a perfect era or a perfect place can structure a community’s vision of its mythical past and future;<sup>17</sup> its present hovers between. This return to a perfect essence—embodied in both an era and a place—is a reflection of the Djerban Jewish map of the cosmos. That essence defines the past, and thus the identity of the community; the possibility of again attaining it creates the community’s felt destiny. Poised between Temple period and Messianic Age, they are a people who remember and who wait.

The Djerban Jewish community traces part of its origin back to the fall of the Temple in 586 B.C. (and the remainder to post-1492 Exodus from Spain); in this, it posits itself as descendants from exiles of the “Promised Land.” In the community’s myth of origin, a stone from the fallen Temple’s door was brought to the Hara Sgheira, initially named *Dighet*, after the word “delet” (door) in Hebrew. Although mourning the Temple has been woven into the fabric of Judaism itself, its manifestations are acute in Djerba’s community. A sugared wheat porridge (*Basisa*, a symbol of the Temple’s foundation)<sup>18</sup> is stirred with a key (its lost key), once a year, acting out a longing to recreate the edifice. Older men wear black stripes on their trousers to mourn the temple. A bride places a candle for mourning at her bedside. Two

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<sup>15</sup> Eliade, 1959, 107.

<sup>16</sup> “Israel is represented as the center of the Earth. The religious man desires to live as near to this sacred space as possible and comes to regard it, the place of his abode, his own land, as the center of the world.” Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993, 714.

<sup>17</sup> Eliade, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> *Basisa* comes from the Arabic root “Asas,” meaning foundation.

candelabra are painted on newly-married couples' homes, making them themselves into "pillars of the Temple to be rebuilt."<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the Zohar (a segment of the Kabbalah, the mystical tradition in Judaism) becomes a locus of messianic longing. Djerban Jews, like many other Jews, believe the Zohar was composed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai; in fact it is documented to be written in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain by Moses de Leon as a collection of Bar Yohai's lectures. Indeed, "le Judaïsme maghrébin est, essentiellement, un judaïsme kabbalistique.» The Zohar, for these communities « entr[ie]nt la flamme d'une espérance Messianique aux jointures de la vie quotidienne.»<sup>20</sup> The Zohar elaborates a paradigm in which exile and redemption of the Jews become *cosmic* exile and redemption.<sup>21</sup> The exile and redemption of God are even in the equation: in the unredeemed universe, God is exiled from God. Specifically, God is separated from, seeking reunion with the *Shekhina*, his female principle.<sup>22</sup> Each man can and must become the "l'actif collaborateur d'éternel desseins: la prière force le salut du monde."<sup>23</sup> By following ritual prescriptions, man can bring his community (and thus his God) closer to redemption. Through prayer, he can help God and His Shekhina eventually reunite. Each individual thus has the power to impact the cosmos.

Although the Zohar's more esoteric ideas are likely understood only by a small group of scholars in Djerba,<sup>24</sup> and not by the majority of the community, it nevertheless is a *ritual*

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<sup>19</sup> Valensi, 1989, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Chouraqui, 127.

<sup>21</sup> This vision was honed by Isaac Luria in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Safed, and percolated into North Africa thereafter. Scholem, 1969, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Scholem, 1969, 70-117.

<sup>23</sup> Chouraqui, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Chouraqui, 130 emphasizes particular Zohar literacy among North African Jews.

*object*<sup>25</sup> laden with associations of great import. Placed at the center of messianic rituals, the book is symbolically associated with Djerban Jewish ideas of final redemption. For North African Jews, “toutes les données de la vie religieuse... et communautaire sont modifiées et interprétées en fonction du message de la Kabbale.”<sup>26</sup> Seeking wholeness or “cosmic redemption,” in order to obliterate exile—a central issue in the Jewish faith—manifests itself in Djerban Jewry with particular zeal; the Zohar mediates.

For example, during Sukkot, Djerban Jews like other Jews around the world construct a temporary shelter, a *sukkah*, to commemorate their ancestors’ forty years of wandering through the wilderness before reaching Israel, and to rejoice in the harvest. In Djerba, in addition, Jews suspend a chair in their sukkahs for Prophet Elijah—the prophet who hearkens the End of Days—with a copy of the Zohar upon it. In this, “the festival of the gathering of the harvest, here becomes the festival of God’s messenger who will announce the arrival of the Messiah and the end of exile.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition, in Djerba, circumcision—the rite initiating Jewish males into the covenant with God—is also linked to the Zohar<sup>28</sup> and to Judaism’s prescription for the End of Days. Baby boys are circumcised on Elijah’s chair. Afterwards, the “Night of the Zohar” commences and Zoharic melodies call for the arrival of the Messiah. The Zohar is read at other moments which bind the community: in the consecration of a new home, upon the commemoration of a death, and a song memorializing its creation is sung on the Sabbath. It is also prominent in the festival of Lag B’Omer—to this point I later return.

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<sup>25</sup> Deshen, 1975, 251-259, speaks of the “ritualization of literacy” in which texts become ritual objects; this paradigm applies to much of the current use of the Zohar in Djerba.

<sup>26</sup> Chouraqui, 128.

<sup>27</sup> Udovitch, and Valensi, 1984, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Ben Ami, 2003, 185 notes similar ceremonies in Jewish communities in Morocco, Iran and Iraq.

Mysticism and messianism conceptually merged for many Jews after their exile from Spain in 1492; the mystical texts justified exile, and offered a vision for its reversal:

By connecting the notions of exile and redemption with the central question of the essence of the universe, they managed to elaborate a system which transformed the exile of the people Israel into an exile of the whole world, and the redemption of their people into a universal cosmic redemption.<sup>29</sup>

The Zohar's power for Jews expelled from Spain into the Ottoman Empire is noted:

"With the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.... [they were] welcomed with open arms by the Ottomans[;]....The Zohar...that most unclassifiable of books, itself an amalgam of narrative, poetic and mystical conglomerate cutting through Christian Spain, infiltrated almost every aspect of the spiritual, communal and intellectual life of the Jewish Levant.<sup>30</sup>

Most Djerban Jews trace their origin to the Spanish expulsion; their Judaism is indeed inflected with the mystical messianic current which thrived thereafter. Moreover, in the 17th century, the Sabbatean messianic movement, which originated in what is now Turkey, was as strong in Morocco and Tunisia as in the Near East.<sup>31</sup> The movement was initiated in 1665 by Shabbatai Zvi, who was born to a traditional Jewish family in Smyrna (what is now Izmir, Turkey), and proclaimed himself messiah, but later converted to Islam upon arrest and threat of execution. Before his conversion, messianic fervor rippled from the Ottoman Empire through Europe. Zvi's movement triggered contact between North African communities and religious academies in Palestine. There are records of the presence of such emissaries in Djerba as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. One rabbi documents 15 such visitors to Djerba's Jewish villages.<sup>32</sup> Despite this actual contact between Djerba and Palestine, the Holy Land was still

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<sup>29</sup> Scholem, 1971, 42-3.

<sup>30</sup> Alcalay, 180.

<sup>31</sup> Valensi, 2002, 894.

<sup>32</sup> Udovitch, 1984, 17.

perhaps quite abstract<sup>33</sup> for the Jews of Djerba; the Holy Land, like the End of Days, remained a *possibility*, a *concept*.

### **Messianism's Collision with Zionism**

The Djerban myth of origin,<sup>34</sup> cherished as an identity marker, offers a monolithic picture, drawing symbolic continuity between the Temple's fall and the Jews' present-day situation. However, diaspora itself is never a continuous, uniform entity: the actual period from that ancient initial exile, through the subsequent Spanish exile up to the present, can hardly be understood linearly. However, Zionism's narrative was often explained thus, with Temple Days and Israel's reclamation seamlessly joined as inevitable; mainstream Zionism "sought a useable past."<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the Zionist narrative, by insisting upon the autochtony of the Jewish people in Israel, had "repressed memories of coming from somewhere else."<sup>36</sup> This "somewhere else" was required to recede to create a coherent national narrative. David Myers references the harnessing of Benedict Anderson's imagined community in the new Jewish state's formation: "great powers of imagination were required for an extraterritorial, multilingual collectivity such as the Jews"<sup>37</sup> to create a unified national narrative. According to Myers, refashioning history enabled the creation of such a narrative.

The narrative created was often reductive. Zionism was made to "stand in an unending line of messianic stirrings and rebellions against an evil destiny, which began right

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<sup>33</sup> For Jews of North Africa, "cette prière n'était qu'un vœux pieux : personne ne pensait alors sérieusement que Dieu les prendrait au mot et renverrait les Juifs dans leur pays. » Chouraqui, 308.

<sup>34</sup> The Djerban Jewish myth of origin is discussed on page 9.

<sup>35</sup> Hertzberg, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Boyarin, and Boyarin, 1993, 715.

<sup>37</sup> Meyers, 5.

after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans.”<sup>38</sup> As Hertzberg states, “what is being obscured is the crucial problem of modern Zionist ideology, the tension between the inherited messianic concept and the radically new meaning that Zionism, at its most modern, was proposing to give it.”<sup>39</sup> This new meaning had political and territorial content and required reckoning with the Palestinian population. It was girded by notions which had emerged out of Romantic nationalism and German historicism, that “the nation is the autonomous subject par excellence and that the state is the telos of its march towards self-fulfillment.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Boas Evron insists upon contextualizing the State of Israel as a “temporal and spatial phenomen[on]” bounded by history and politics, instead of “as an articulation of an immanent nationhood that is 2,500 years old.”<sup>41</sup>

Harvey Wettstein suggests that two millennia ago, the exile of the Jews after the fall of the Temple was “a cosmic jolt...” and “to view one’s group in exile is to suppose that what is in some sense the proper order has been interrupted.”<sup>42</sup> In the Zionist idea, such rupture in the proper order stands in polar contrast to an ideal of continuity of the Jews on their land. Yet the messianic mythos of a unified people in a promised land, and the newly-politicized notions of the ownership of that land would come head to head.

### **The Zionist Foundational Myth**

I now examine certain paradigms within Zionism, and their potential impact on the Djerban Jews. I ultimately use them as lenses on the shift I argue occurred in that community

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<sup>38</sup> Hertzberg, 17.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Piterberg, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Evron Boas in Piterberg, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Wettstein, 47-8.

in the last fifty years. First, “Negation of Exile” is a stratagem to create territorial existence in Israel as the single viable mode for Jews. Zerubavel explains: “Zionist collective memory...constructs Exile as a long, dark period of suffering and persecution.”<sup>43</sup> The period of Exile is represented as a “hole... an acute lack of positive characteristics”<sup>44</sup> Diasporic Jews, who lived “somewhere else,”<sup>45</sup> lived in a void, seeming not fully to exist. Indeed, “a recurrent feature of Zionist thought was the belief that Jews had become exiles from *history*. According to this view, diaspora Jews had ceased to be masters of their own historical fates. The critique of the diasporic condition was based on the premise that vitality in history required a national body.”<sup>46</sup> In these Zionist tropes, Jews outside of Israel were outside of *true* existence and *true* history.

Gabi Piterberg critiques what he calls the “Zionist foundational myth:” the negation of exile “establishes a continuity between an ancient past, in which there existed Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel, and a present that renews it in the settlement of Palestine.”<sup>47</sup> The underlying assumption is that “from time immemorial, the Jews constituted a territorial nation. It follows that a non-territorial existence must be abnormal, incomplete and inauthentic.”<sup>48</sup> I argue that when Israel *became sovereign*, the Djerban Jews came to see their own existence as “abnormal, incomplete and inauthentic,” emptied of the significance they had originally perhaps attributed to it within Djerba. Meanwhile, the myth’s complement was this: “the land too was condemned to exile as long as there was no Jewish sovereignty over it, it lacked any meaningful or authentic history, awaiting redemption with

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<sup>43</sup> Zerubavel, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Zerubavel, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin, 715.

<sup>46</sup> Myers, 4, emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> Piterberg, chapter 3, 2.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*



the return of the Jews.”<sup>49</sup> This myth (while instituting a forgetting of the Palestinian population) also furnished a sense of common purpose, or indeed common destiny, for diasporic Jewish communities awaiting return.

Since the fall of the Temple, Jerusalem has been laden with past and future, understood for centuries by Jews as a spiritual concept, a symbol of redemption and completion. For millennia, Djerban Jews have mourned Jerusalem and called it home. Yet, this messianic, almost mystical home did not conflict with a sense of belonging within their physical home in Djerba. If Israel was the *bilad alhaqaniya* of the Djerban Jews, it became so in a profoundly different way when it acquired physical and political dimensions in 1948. In this, the Djerbans began the losing process of their first *bilad*.

### **Zion Itself?**

Shlomo Deshen notes that “prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, [North African Jews] were to be found only in small communities in the traditional holy cities of Jerusalem and Tiberias and possibly in one or two other localities.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, between 1918 and 1948, there were only about a thousand immigrants from North Africa residing in Israel.<sup>51</sup> As Israel was perhaps understood abstractly and spiritually, they *did not have to go there* to feel connected to it. Connection could be maintained while on Tunisian soil. Since the creation of Israel, there are now some 70,000 Tunisian Jews residing there. The messianic vision of the ingathering of the exiles in the contiguous sacred land of Zion had been nourished for two millennia. However, the actualization of that place “had fired the

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<sup>49</sup> Piterberg, *ibid*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Deshen, 1974, 31.

<sup>51</sup> Chouraqui, 302.

imagination of many North African Jews and had been the impetus of their immigration.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, an influx of emissaries and Zionist groups had been sent on missions from Israel to transform the imagined journey to an actual one.

It must be noted that Rabbinic Judaism and Zionism largely coexisted without strife in the Middle East, indeed, “the religious ideology that existed in Europe, which saw Zionism as antithetical to Judaism because it tried to bring the messianic age rather than leave that matter in the hands of heaven, did not arise in the East.”<sup>53</sup> Whereas Zionism was often the political tool of secularized segments in Europe, in the Middle East, it was generally a more organic outgrowth of traditional messianic thought. Jews of the Middle East had not fashioned, and were thus somewhat remote from, Zionism’s political agenda. In this, they were able to incorporate Zionism into their own traditional Rabbinic and messianic framework. Israel was likely understood as the fulfillment of their religiosity as opposed to a strictly political movement. In fact, the Zionism of North Africa was probably most driven by a mystical verve. A 1947 report on North African Jews by the Joint Jewish Committee in Tunisia cautions moderation among new Zionists: “Circumstances during the last year have awakened among all African Jews a mystic trend to Zionism and simultaneously have brought a change in their character which has become aggressive and violent.”<sup>54</sup> Upon Israel’s creation, the realities and perceptions of both Jews and Muslims shifted within Djerba itself. Through the creation of a new *territory* for the Jews, was the first home, Djerba to become a non-territory?

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<sup>52</sup> Deshen, 1974, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Goldberg, 1996, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Stillman, 1991, 467.

## **A Cultural Doubleness? : “The Last Arab Jews”**

Clifford Geertz attributes cultural doubleness to the situation of the Djerban Jews, that of a “monoform community” potentially thriving in a “polyform society.”<sup>55</sup> Discrete unto itself, Djerban Jewish society is also permeable to its environment, cross-pollinated by local Tunisian mores. Abraham Udovitch calls the Djerbans the “Last Arab Jews:” profoundly Jewish in their identity, but simultaneously, of the Arab world. Geertz examines the difficulty of maintaining this “monoform/polyform” duality in the wake of political shifts like the formation of the Tunisian state, as it becomes threatened by “the loyalty-fusing imperatives of modern nationalism.” The creation of an independent nation—especially with the rise of Pan-Arab fervor<sup>56</sup> seems to compel the Jews to choose: assimilate or emigrate.”<sup>57</sup> Subsequent political ruptures and crises (especially the Bizerte crisis in 1961 and the 1967 defeat) in the Arab world created new psychological ossification of boundaries between the Jews and Muslims of Djerba. These crises drove both Jews and Muslims of Djerba, already insular, deeper into their own respective groups. In the subsequent chapter, I examine the relative disintegration of this so-called monoform / polyform duality in the last fifty years.

## **A Minority Within a Minority**

It is arguable that Djerba’s monoform Jewish community resides, rather, within a somewhat monoform Muslim majority. Most Djerban Muslims are a Berber minority, within Tunisia’s Arab majority population and many are members of the “historically despised

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<sup>55</sup> Geertz, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Tunisia joined the Arab League in 1958, two years after its independence.

<sup>57</sup> Geertz, 2.

minority sect, the Ibadiya, among a Sunni majority population.”<sup>58</sup> Ibadis, belonging to a distinct sect of Islam which developed 50 years after the Prophet’s death, refer to themselves as “the people of straightness.”<sup>59</sup> Sunni Muslims have typically regarded Ibadis as a Kharijite group, an offshoot of the 7<sup>th</sup> century secessionist group. Ibadis themselves reject this designation, preferring to emphasize their distinctiveness from the Khawaraj. Ibadī Islam is exacting; in contrast to Sunni Muslims, Ibadis reject the possibility of the Prophet’s intercession for sinners and insist that the punishment of hellfire is eternal.<sup>60</sup> Yet although the Ibadis part ways with Sunnis on certain doctrinal details, and have slight differences in prayer practices, they are not ultimately very dissimilar. Perhaps most important is the perception of the Ibadis’ difference, which has rendered the group so marginal in both Ibadī and Sunni communities and discourse.

The Ibadiya are found largely in Oman, East Africa, Algeria’s Mزاب valley, the Nafus mountains of Libya, and the island of Djerba. Mentions of the group in history reflect its members’ fierce adherence to their sect. Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the island was split between Ibadis of Wahbi (moderate) and Nukkari (extreme) persuasion; Wahbis gained ascendancy.<sup>61</sup> In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Djerba held fast to Ibadism in the wake of the Aghlabid invasion.<sup>62</sup> Under the Zirids in the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, “bien des faits confirment l’influence des Abadites en Ifriquiya.”<sup>63</sup> Ibadism had significantly waned in Tunisia by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, except for in Djerba, which remains faithful to the doctrine still today.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Dshen, 1996, 134.

<sup>59</sup> Hoffman, 1.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Lewicki, 5-16.

<sup>62</sup> Lewicki, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Idris, Tome Premier, 745.

<sup>64</sup> Lewicki, 5.

Brunschvig, describing 15<sup>th</sup> century Djerba as “l’île berberophone” elaborates on the Djerbans’ “appartenance à une secte religieuse dissidente, à heterodoxie musulmane du harijisme”<sup>65</sup> Ibadis were understood through their difference and its careful preservation.

Ibadis believe that those who have committed grave sins without repentance are *kuffar ni’ma*, “monotheists who are ungrateful for the blessings God has bestowed upon them.”<sup>66</sup> Ibadis believe that one must practice “dissociation” or *bara’a* towards the *kuffar ni’ma*, be they sinning Ibadis or non-Ibadi Muslims. This disassociation takes the form of “withholding friendship (*wilaya*) rather than outright hostility.”<sup>67</sup> *Wuquf* is “reservation to one whose status is unclear.”<sup>68</sup> This level of interaction may perhaps apply to the case of the Djerban Jews, understood as People of the Book, yet not Muslim.

Nur al-Din al-Salimi, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Omani Ibadi thinker, elaborates what association might be permitted with the corrupt monotheist; although he is likely referring to non-Ibadi Muslims, perhaps the attitudes can be applied to Jews as well:

The Law allows certain things with the corrupt monotheist that it does not allow of the polytheist, such as intermarriage, eating their slaughtered animals... giving the greeting of peace, saying ‘God bless you’ if he sneezes, praying behind him, praying over him if he dies, accepting his testimony, and interacting with him in all worldly matters just as one would interact with Muslims with whom one has *wilaya*.<sup>69</sup>

Especially concerned with ritual purity, Ibadis are historically insular. The Jews thus lived “among another minority group that was also on the defensive.”<sup>70</sup> One Djerban Jew, who relocated to Paris in the 1980s, but who returns frequently, confirms:

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<sup>65</sup> Brunschvig, 328.

<sup>66</sup> Hoffman, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Hoffman, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Nami on [www.islamfact.com](http://www.islamfact.com).

<sup>69</sup> Nur al-Din al-Salimi in Hoffman, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Dshen, 2005, 4.

The Djerban Muslims are not liked by the other Muslims. We used to play cards in Djerba with Muslim Djerban friends, and any Muslim from Tunis was called “Berani”: outsider. Only pure Djerbans. When people came to Djerba from the outside—like Gabes<sup>71</sup>—you would find them always alone. Now when I go to Djerba, I find the old crowds, the Djerbans who have been there forever.<sup>72</sup>

In this instance, it is non-Djerbans, perhaps even more than Jews, who are *Other*. Both the Jewish and Muslim Djerbans share profound appreciation for strict religious observance and social conservatism. Ibadi Islam and Orthodox Judaism converge in certain of their preoccupations; both groups are profoundly self-protective and interior.

### **The Interiority of the Djerban Jews**

Since an intellectual resurgence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, initiated by Rabbi Perez,<sup>73</sup> Djerba’s Jewish community has retained a core of vitality.<sup>74</sup> Perez was the catalyst for intensive study, construction of many of the Hara’s synagogues and institutionalization of religious education centered around the synagogue. Young boys began a rigorous training in Torah at the age of 5, and then later, Talmud and Zohar. Thereafter, Rabbi Moshe Khalfon HaCohen (1874-1950) became a dominant force in the community, codifying local Djerban Jewish customs,<sup>75</sup> and resisting French colonial influence. Meticulous religious observance was at the center of daily life. Indeed, in this period, an appointed Sheiqh checked whether

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<sup>71</sup> Gabes is a town in Southern Tunisian, approximately a two hour drive from Djerba.

<sup>72</sup> Zachino Kabla, Paris, January 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Udovitch, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Particularly after the introduction of the printing press to Djerba in 1903, intellectual activity has increased. In the past century, the Jewish community of Djerba has produced close to 500 published books. Udovitch, 1984, 84-5, notes that for a community this size, “this impressive level of literary productivity is unusual, and, with the exception of such specialized communities as academia, may be unprecedented.”

<sup>75</sup> Goldberg, 22.

men had worn their tefilin (prayer scrolls), and “beat with a stick”<sup>76</sup> anyone who had violated the ritual prescriptions.

During the French Protectorate (1881-1956) and beyond, only Djerba was able to “consolidate and maintain its religious leadership....at the very time when communal fabric everywhere else was disintegrating.”<sup>77</sup> In 1878, the Alliance Israelite Generale (offering a secular curriculum and French instruction) opened its first school in Tunis. The Alliance, created in 1860 in Paris, sought to promote education of Jews throughout the world. In order to preserve its traditional boundaries, Djerba refused opening a school<sup>78</sup> and the rabbis threatened excommunication of any attendees. To demonstrate his commitment to traditional education, Rebbe Khalfon universalized Torah Study and subsidized education for boys. Meanwhile, in Northern Tunisia, Jews were typically identified with the French regime and culture, and defined themselves thus.<sup>79</sup>

The Jews of Tunis began to speak French, and today many continue to do so. However, the Djerban Jews have always spoken their own dialect, which varies in pronunciation and in vocabulary from the dialect of the Muslims, and is laced with Hebrew learned in their yeshivot. During the French Protectorate, many of the Jews of Tunis joined the Communist party; such outside ideologies had little sway in Djerba until Zionism encroached upon the island. Under French rule, rabbinic judges had been appointed to handle matters internal to the community such as marriage and divorce. Upon independence, such matters were handled within the Jewish community informally. After Bourguiba’s ascension

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<sup>76</sup> Udovitch, 18.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, 20.

<sup>78</sup> Deshen, 1975, 252.

<sup>79</sup> A number of Tunisian Jews (mostly from the capital) acquired French citizenship in the 1920s and 30s. Saadoun 448. However, it was rare for a Djerban Jew to apply for French citizenship; in my interviews in Djerba, I was told there were only several cases.

in 1956, the Jews, as all others, were subject to the new administration and its legislation. The Jews of Tunis integrated themselves more readily into this system, some working as bureaucrats and many as teachers. A Tunisian Muslim who lived in Tunis at this time describes the life of the Jews in the capital:

I remember Moshe and David's jewelry store...they were the most popular people in the neighborhood. They played cards. The Jews I knew were not religious. They were leftist communists.<sup>80</sup>

While Tunis' Jewish community became more heterogeneous and cosmopolitan, its loyalties scattered, Djerba's community became all the more homogenous and insular. No Djerban Jew has held any position of authority in the government bureaucracy at even a local or regional level.<sup>81</sup> Not officially denied access to these positions, they simply chose their enclosure, the sufficiency of their own community.<sup>82</sup>

According to Geertz, the "island within an island" has been maintained to an extraordinary degree: the Djerban Jewish core of ritual, law and cultural and intellectual fluorescence enabled the community to retain its life-force. On the surface, the community is currently thriving: the population is young and increasing. Youth marry in their late teens. Wives become pregnant almost immediately. Yet, in recent decades, the community has been understood as a relic, the preservation of an ancient and diminishing world. Can this be so if festivals and rituals are observed passionately and meticulously; rabbinic interpretation is continuously privileged; babies are born and inducted? There is even one printing press, printing scholarship in Judeo-Arabic. Despite this ostensible flourishing, there seems to be a

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<sup>80</sup> Nouman Kacem, Washington D.C. January 2006.

<sup>81</sup> Udovitch, 1984, confirms this; in 2003, Djerban Jews do not know of any instance in which a member of the community has worked in the government.

<sup>82</sup> The Djerban Jews who opt to mix more freely with the Muslim communities live in Houmt Souq, the island's capital, instead of within the Haras. I know two Jewish families in the capital; generally less religious, they are somewhat shunned by the Hara's Jews.



keen sense among the population that this place, their home, is not their home and has never been their home. The “Arabs” are, profoundly, Other. The notion that they, themselves, could be “Arab Jews” would be wholly alien.

### **The Impact of Tourism**

Beginning in the sixties, Djerba’s Jews and Muslims *shared* a threatening “Other.” The tourist industry was burgeoning: secularism invaded the once-enclosed island. Djerba is typically described in 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> European century travel-logs as being remote, intact, unspoiled. The traditional Jews and likewise the traditional Muslims who surrounded them, would all have to contend with a changed universe. In Djerba, where “there can be little doubt that tradition and religion are taken more seriously...than in most of the rest of Tunisia”<sup>83</sup> the collision with secularism would be especially robust. By the 1960s, tourism would be the single largest source of income on the island. Casinos, bowling alleys, night clubs and Club Med vacation packages would dot the coast, only a few miles away from enclaves of traditionalism.

The island had at last been irrevocably touched by the outside world; continued sustenance for Jew and Muslim alike, despite themselves, would soon depend on more contact with that world. Despite this mutual distaste for the rapid modernizing of the island, each group sought solace *within* its own. The landscape of heightened political tension and secular influence contributed to the self-protective impulses of each group.

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<sup>83</sup> Sylvester, 96.

## **Jews and Muslims in Djerba: A Historical Overview<sup>84</sup>:**

From the Islamic conquest on, the status of the Jew in the Arab world was that of dhimmi: protected though subject to discrimination as a follower of a religion tolerated by Islam. Jews were required to wear distinguishing clothes,<sup>85</sup> to pay the jizya tax to the Bey, to live in special quarters and could not acquire property. Their situation varied, less stable in periods of economic and political disruption, however, the Jews or “the People of the Book” were afforded general security as a monotheistic minority.

Djerban Jews make periodic appearances in historical and commercial documents; these mentions give nuance to the Djerban Jewish position as an especially insular group of dhimmi who nonetheless, interacted with the Muslim population. At the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Maimonides, traveling to North Africa, notes the Djerban Jewish preoccupation with ritual purity.<sup>86</sup> In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Moses (born in Spain, later a Rabbi in Tunis and Cairo) reveals that Djerban Jews entrusted their livestock to Muslims during the Sabbath.<sup>87</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the distinctive dress of Djerban Jews is noted during the Spanish expedition of Charles the 5<sup>th</sup>.<sup>88</sup> Two centuries later, they appear in the Bey’s fiscal records for payment of the jizya tax.

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<sup>84</sup> Jewish-Muslim history has often been framed in one of two polar models. The “neo-lachrymose” conception of history “emphasizes the continuity of...persecution from the time of Mohammed until the demise of most Arab Jewish communities in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.” The notion’s “mirror-image” is “the common Arab claim that Jews were always well-treated in the lands of Islam.” Beinun, 14-17. I attempt to offer a history in neither mold, acknowledging the challenges the community has faced without overemphasizing them. The notion of a “neo-lachrymose” history was coined by Salo Baron in 1928. A more thorough discussion is offered by Cohen, 1994, xv-xvii.

<sup>85</sup> Saadoun, 445.

<sup>86</sup> Maimonides, traveling through Djerba in 1165, portrays the community unflatteringly, noting its ignorance and superstitions and obsession with purity. Udovitch, 12; Idris, 764.

<sup>87</sup> Udovitch, 13.

<sup>88</sup> Udovitch, 14.

The dhimmi's status was transformed by the Pacte Fondamentale in 1857, which abolished many of the previous economic and social discriminatory measures: security was "guaranteed for all our subjects and for those residing in our Regency irrespective of religion, language or color....the dhimmi among our subjects may not be compelled to change his religion."<sup>89</sup> In 1881, France occupied Tunisia; the Jews (particularly Northerners) felt to be under France's protection.<sup>90</sup> Djerban Jews, however, distanced themselves from assimilation of French culture, resisting all outside secular influence.

Saadoun states that "in the reported collective memory of Tunisia's Jews, Muslim-Jewish coexistence was both practical and tranquil."<sup>91</sup> However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, new trends and revolutionary spirits were brewing in a region frustrated with colonial domination. Early incarnations of Arab Nationalism and Zionism<sup>92</sup> collided ominously. In Tunisia, the nationalistic Destour Party, founded in 1920 under Habib Bourguiba, sought Tunisia's independence. In the subsequent three decades, enthusiasm mounted to that end. In 1934, a letter written by Joseph Fisher (secretary general of the French branch of the Jewish National Fund in Jerusalem) several weeks after the Constantine pogrom,<sup>93</sup> expresses anxieties about Arab nationalism: "I have not the slightest doubt that this pogrom had been organized and executed by the young Arab nationalist movement."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Stillman, 184.

<sup>90</sup> Tunisian Jews were generally well-treated under the French. However, unlike in Algeria, where the French granted full French citizenship to Algerian Jews under the Cremieux Decree of 1870, Tunisian Jews were not automatically offered such citizenship.

<sup>91</sup> Saadoun, 450.

<sup>92</sup> By 1898, the first Zionist youth movement had appeared in Tunis. Chouraqui, 299.

<sup>93</sup> In 1934, a Nazi incited pogrom, (triggered by anti-Semitic broadcasts) in Constantine, Algeria left 25 Jews dead and many injured.

<sup>94</sup> Stillman, 365.

According to Fisher, the nationalistic movement had taken on an anti-Semitic<sup>95</sup> cast, and the press had been inciting the public against the Jews “whom it depicts as a docile instrument of English and French imperialism.”<sup>96</sup> Fisher stresses that while anti-Semitism was originally an imported phenomenon from Europe, in recent years, it has been adopted and assimilated by North African elements. He laments: “This conflict dates back to the events of 1929. Prior to that year, there were no anti-Semitic [indigenous] manifestations in the North African countries. An anti-Semitic movement existed, but it hailed from the European element and appeared as a foreign import. This time, we are facing a fierce anti-Semitic movement which emanates from the Arabs themselves.”<sup>97</sup> Fisher refers to the 1929 Western Wall riots between Palestinians and Zionists as a catalyst for Tunisian anti-Semitism.

In the 1920s-1950s, nationalist sentiment escalated. Meanwhile, Pan-Arabism<sup>98</sup> and Pan-Islam would be increasingly stressed, alienating the Jews. Yet while the Jews were alienated from their Muslim compatriots, Muslims were likely alienated from Jews as Zionist efforts mounted. In 1921, Tunisia sent its first delegate to the 12<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress.<sup>99</sup> In 1922, a council composed of Alfred Valensi, President of Tunisia’s Zionist Federation, and others appealed to Tunisia’s Jews to contribute to the Keren-Hayesod fund for the “restoration of Palestine,” and the “return there of the exiles who, when living at last under

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<sup>95</sup> Anti-Semitism finds its original context in Europe. In the Middle East, anti-Jewish sentiment generally rose in tandem with the Arab-Israeli conflict and is more precisely *anti-Zionism*. At this time, the tropes and images of Anti-Semitism were harnessed in the Arab world. Further discussion by Cohen, 8.

<sup>96</sup> Stillman, 366.

<sup>97</sup> Stillman, 366.

<sup>98</sup> Particularly upon the ascension of Nasser in Egypt in 1952.

<sup>99</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress, in 1900, deplored the absence of Zionist propaganda in Africa. The 5<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress the subsequent year announced the creation of new Zionist groups in Fez, Algiers and Tunis. In 1924, the first Zionist journal in Tunis was founded by Felix Allouche. Chouraqui, 299-300.

normal conditions, will be able to give full scope to their national genius and, consequently, contribute more effectively to the progress of civilization.”<sup>100</sup> If Tunisian Jews could only richly contribute to civilization while in Israel, then their contributions in Tunis were, by default, paltry by comparison. Non-territorial existence was portrayed, as I have suggested, as “incomplete.”<sup>101</sup>

In 1927, a confidential memo deplors the lack of consolidated effort on the part of Tunisian Jewry in Zionist efforts: “Though this country has a Jewish population of over 100,000, the majority of whom are Zionists and not as Frenchified as the Jews of Algeria, or even Morocco, the lack of initiative ... has prevented united work.”<sup>102</sup> In ensuing years, emissaries sent from Israel prompted more initiative.<sup>103</sup> Even in Djerba, which tended to isolate itself from outside currents, Zionism was gaining a foothold. Already in 1906, a Djerban sage “expressed enthusiastic approval”<sup>104</sup> of the Zionist movement. The Zionist body, Atereth-Tsiyon, established in Djerba in 1919, would organize agricultural training and education in modern Hebrew in the forties. The group’s membership would grow to 200, including that of the revered Rebbe Khalfon. In fact, the restructuring of education in Djerba—supplementing yeshiva school with secular subjects and opening separate schools for girls—were inspired by Zionist ideology.<sup>105</sup>

The collision of these two rising trends, the Arabs seeking recognition of their autonomy as a State on their own soil and the Jews seeking the creation of an autonomous

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<sup>100</sup> Stillman, 320.

<sup>101</sup> Piterberg, 2.

<sup>102</sup> Stillman, 322.

<sup>103</sup> “Dès 1943, l’Organisation sioniste mondiale et les parties politiques s’emploient à réorganizer le mouvement en Afrique du Nord.” Chouraqui, 302.

<sup>104</sup> Dshen, 1996, 142.

<sup>105</sup> Udovitch, 88. These curricula retained Djerba’s core religious training, as opposed to those offered by the French-sponsored Alliance schools and opposed by Djerba’s rabbis.

state on more mythical soil, was foreboding: “tension developed in the 1930s between the Tunisian national movement (Neo-Destour) and the emerging Zionist movement in Tunisia. The Neo-Destour prevented Jabotinsky from appearing in Tunisia in 1932.”<sup>106</sup> The Zionist bodies would further consolidate themselves in the rise of anti-Semitism during World War Two, hoping to protect the Jews against pogroms. Self-defense instruction was set up as early as 1943 through Mossad Le-Aliyah. In Djerba too, an operation was sponsored which enlisted 50 youths for 24 hours a week in training.<sup>107</sup>

As nationalism’s grip on Arabs tightened and as Zionism further ignited Jewish imagination, a gulf was created between the two groups. Each was locked into different, indeed contradictory rhetoric. In 1934, the Muslim Young Men distributed a virulent anti-British and anti-Zionist tract in Tunisia. Imperialism of all kinds here conflate as the British, the French and the Jews are understood to be united in aim. The Jews and Western imperialists are seen as working towards the same project, the occupation of Muslim lands. The creed calls: “O Zealous Muslim People! We are addressing this manifesto to you, O people, hoping that you will aid Palestine ... This is a small amount compared to the donations sent by the Tunisian Zionists to the Zionists of Palestine for land purchases and to strengthen the Zionist movement.”<sup>108</sup> A lurid description of the crimes committed against their Muslim brethren in Palestine is included.

These various tracts distributed by Jews and Muslims during this period, are heightened emotional propaganda intended to shape each group’s vision of itself, its potential

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<sup>106</sup> However, “a close examination of the relations between the Zionists and the Neo-Destour shows that despite the attitudes of the Neo-Destour to Zionism, the Zionists were not significantly harmed.” Saadoun, 450-1. Before Israel’s creation, hostility to Zionism as a movement was not yet widespread in Tunisia.

<sup>107</sup> Laskier, 282.

<sup>108</sup> Stillman, 382.

and its duties. Meanwhile, Tunisian Jews occasionally found themselves in a particular bind: “Whereas Muslim elements accused the Jews of collaborating with the Residency, Frenchmen and other Europeans described them as deserters who increasingly backed the Neo-Destour.”<sup>109</sup> The sense of mutual alienation was becoming more palpable. During World War Two, Germany occupied Tunisia from November 1942 through May 1943 during which 5000 Jews were subjected to forced labor in camps.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, “[t]he attitude of the [Muslim] Tunisian population towards the Jews during the six months of German occupation was basically one of indifference with occasional gestures of friendship, or inversely, acts of hostility.”<sup>111</sup> This indifference would surely impact the Jews’ psyche, likely severing felt connections of many to their birthplace.

### **Post-1948 Developments**

A variety of Zionist organizations were circulating in the Jewish-Tunisian milieu by the end of the 1940s. Besides the Alliance Israélite Universelle, mostly concerned with education, Mossad Le ‘Aliya was active between 1949-52. The Jewish Agency for Palestine sent emissaries from Israel. Other organizations, based in Paris (like the AJDC) were in close contact with Tunisian Jews.<sup>112</sup> Some Tunisian Jews emigrated illegally, before the creation of Israel, in 1947-8, aided by a local Zionist underground. By 1948-9, “Mossad Le-Aliya” was permitted by French authorities to organize emigration discreetly out of Tunis, without official legal sanction.<sup>113</sup> In fact, “within a period of just over a decade, in the 1950s and 60s,

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<sup>109</sup> Laskier, 263.

<sup>110</sup> Abitbol, 130.

<sup>111</sup> Abitbol, 136.

<sup>112</sup> Laskier, 258.

<sup>113</sup> Laskier, 265.

the age-old Jewish communities of North Africa ceased to exist.”<sup>114</sup> From 1948-49, 6200 Tunisian Jews left for Israel, 3725 in 1950, 3414 in 1951, 2548 in 1952. The independence years saw a resurgence of emigration, rising to 6104 in 1955 and 6545 in 1956.<sup>115</sup> Many also left for France. Between 60,000-70,000 would arrive to Israel, and approximately 40,000 to France. In 1971, there were only 9,000 Jews left in Tunisia, whereas there had been approximately 110,000 in 1948.<sup>116</sup>

Upon Bourguiba’s rise to power, “genuine efforts were made... to show goodwill and win over the anxious Jewish communities.”<sup>117</sup> André Barouche, a Jew, was named minister of planning and construction in the cabinet. In 1956, Bourguiba was at the pinnacle of his popularity with the Jews by opposing Nasser’s policy of expelling Egyptian Jews during the Sinai/ Suez crisis of 1956.<sup>118</sup> Bourguiba did halt emigration to Israel for the duration of the year, so as not to anger the Arab world, but permitted it again thereafter. However, despite the best intentions of the new Tunisian administration, “Jewish integration in an independent Tunisia would not be so simple.”<sup>119</sup> In the case of the North, Jews had been educated at Alliance Israelite Universelle and Protectorate schools. Once Arabic was appointed the official language for use in all spheres in 1955, Jews were linguistically ill-equipped to work in many formal and bureaucratic settings. Laskier notes that “[not] all Jews adapted to Arabization and, with the passage of time, during the 1960s-70s, were replaced by Muslims in the liberal professions and civil service.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Dshen, 1974, 34.

<sup>115</sup> Laskier, 265-6.

<sup>116</sup> Dshen, *ibid*, 34

<sup>117</sup> Stillman, 172.

<sup>118</sup> Laskier, 289.

<sup>119</sup> Laskier, 265.

<sup>120</sup> Laskier, 265.



Meanwhile, trends of exclusion in the Arab world continued to set the Jews ill at ease. André Barouche was not reappointed to Bourguiba's cabinet after its first reshuffling, and no Jew was appointed to such a position again during Bourguiba's regime.<sup>121</sup> Tunisia, after distancing from Nasser finally acquiesced and joined the Arab League in 1958. The government diminished Jewish communal authority with Law No. 58-78 of July 1958, dissolving the "Jewish Communal Council of Tunis" and replacing it with "The Provisional Commission for the Oversight of Jewish Religious Matters." The latter had narrow religious and educational authority.<sup>122</sup> In 1961, when Bourguiba at last evicted the French from the Northern port of Bizerte, popular opinion rose against the Jews who were accused of harboring empathy for the French from the beginning.

However, it must be noted that despite reverberations of Pan-Arab policies and generally anti-Zionist attitudes in the region, Bourguiba's Tunisia was particularly tolerant of the Jews and their emigration ambitions. Bourguiba was seen by many to possess a measured and realistic viewpoint regarding Palestine. He advocated the eventual recognition of and relative cooperation with Israel, and asked that the Arabs focus upon their own economic and technological development.<sup>123</sup> Bourguiba even refused Nasser's instructions to break relations with Western Germany after its diplomatic recognition of Israel.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, "the fact that Bourguiba tolerated the presence of aliyah emissaries and permitted the Jewish Agency apparatus in Tunis... was a unique phenomenon in the Arab world in the 1950s."<sup>125</sup> In 1957, the government requested the Emigration office register under a Swiss name; the general

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<sup>121</sup> Stillman, 173.

<sup>122</sup> Stillman, 173.

<sup>123</sup> Sylvester, 193.

<sup>124</sup> Sylvester, 195.

<sup>125</sup> Laskier, 291.

trends in the Arab world could not be entirely disregarded and Bourguiba was willing to alienate Nasser only to a degree. However, although the agency was renamed, it was still permitted to exist. In 1964, the government made emigration more unwieldy for the Jews, and Bourguiba explained: “you must realize that it is impossible for me to ignore and detach myself from events which, in the Arab world, are passionately regarded as of major importance to the Arab states.”<sup>126</sup> Despite this, Bourguiba ignored warnings from the rest of the Middle East to halt the emigration process entirely.

### **Transformation of Djerba’s Harat al-Yehud**

By 1967, 23,000 Jews remained in Tunisia. After the June riots, in which synagogues were desecrated and Jewish shops pillaged, most fled the country; within the year, about 7,000 remained.<sup>127</sup> In 1982, the PLO presence (and Israeli counter-operations) in Tunis caused further deterioration in Jewish-Muslim relations, prompting successive wave of emigration. Since 1987, with the transfer of leadership in a bloodless coup to Zine Abdine Ben Ali, there has been resurgence in protection of remaining Jewish communities, which in turn actively support the current regime. In light of these waves of emigration, Djerba’s Jewish Haras have taken on a new face altogether. In both villages, the Muslim population has moved into the homes Jews vacated upon emigrating: in the late sixties,<sup>128</sup> “the once exclusively Jewish village [Hara Kebira] thus gained a population of 5000 Muslims . . . . The

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<sup>126</sup> Laskier, 305.

<sup>127</sup> Stillman, 174.

<sup>128</sup> Jewish emigration led to plummeting prices of realty, enabling less wealthy Muslims to acquire Jewish property cheaply. Deshen, 1997, 98.

truncated Jewish population resided in a circle around [the] center, and most of the Muslims in an outer circle around the Jewish dwellings."<sup>129</sup> Davis problematizes the situation further:

The mutual trust established between [D]jerban Jews and Muslims through centuries of peaceful but separate coexistence was not automatically extended to the newcomers, who compound religious and cultural differences with economic ones. The Muslims generally emigrated to find relief from poverty; conversely, it tended to be the wealthier Jews who stayed behind.<sup>130</sup>

Such economic incongruities, rising discomfort of the island's Muslims with Israel since the second Intifada, and increased Zionism among its' Jews have created an uncomfortable Hara. Perhaps the most striking shift in the last ten years, under pressure to modernize, many Djerban Jews now send their children to mixed state schools (with Muslims) in addition to daily hours of yeshiva education. As much as 80 percent attends the state school on the Hara's outskirts.<sup>131</sup> What is the impact of this increase in daily contact between the communities? How is it that as the Djerban Jews of the Hara more occupy the same space as the Muslims, each group retreats more decisively behind its respective closed doors? The notion of historical and *continued* permeability between Jews and Muslims is brandished and perhaps romanticized by Ben Ali's government, and by the Tunisian population at large. The Muslims of Tunis and even of Djerba's capital, Houmt Souq (who have relatively limited contact with the Jews of the Hara) call the Jews "our Jews;" the Jews and Muslims who now coexist in the Hara at close range are far less likely to speak so positively of their shared experience.

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<sup>129</sup> Dshen, 1997, 98.

<sup>130</sup> Davis, 480.

<sup>131</sup> Ouzi Kidoushim, head of Djerban yeshiva school in Paris, son of David Kidoushim, head of yeshiva in Djerba. January 2006; Alite Bitane, Djerba.

## CHAPTER TWO: PRE AND POST 1948

### **Introduction and Methodology**

In this chapter, I compare boundaries between Jews and Muslims of Djerba in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before 1948, to my own fieldwork in 2003-5. I attempt to examine the shift for the Jews in their identification of Djerba as *home*, and belonging within it, to feeling more alienated on the island, and ascribing the notion of home to Israel. In this, exile—existence in Djerba—became a “hole” or “lack,”<sup>132</sup> in a new way, “inauthentic and incomplete.”<sup>133</sup>

I glean my first set of examples from a series of interviews<sup>134</sup> I conducted in Djerban moshavim (cooperative villages), towns and cities in Israel. I interviewed twenty Djerbans total in Tel Aviv, Lod, Netivot, Betigadi, Brechia, Tlamim, Ofakim, Ashkelon and Jerusalem. My interviewees all left Djerba (or Southern Tunisia) for Israel between 1948 and 1966,<sup>135</sup> and describe memories of interactions with Muslims<sup>136</sup> before their departure. I contextualize my interviews with secondary literature detailing Jewish-Muslim relations in Tunisia in this period, particularly focusing on ethnographic and historical writings of Abraham Udovitch, Shlomo Doshen and Clifford Geertz.

I first examine aspects of the Jews’ and Muslims’ commercial, religious and coexistence, and particularly Jewish embeddedness within the larger Muslim milieu in the

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<sup>132</sup> Zerubavel, 19.

<sup>133</sup> Piterberg, 2.

<sup>134</sup> I conducted 19 interviews in Djerban Jewish Arabic dialect and one in French. The translations are mine and are confirmed by Zachino Kabla (a Djerban Jew in Paris) and by Nooman Kacem, (a Tunisian Muslim in Washington.)

<sup>135</sup> Except for one family who left the Hara Kebira in 2003 for Betigadi, Israel.

<sup>136</sup> Many of my interviewees use the terms “Muslim” and “Arab” interchangeably, not differentiating between religious and ethnic or pan-national categories. This appellation contrasts with Djerbans in 2004 who almost exclusively use the term “Arab.”

first half of the twentieth century. I then look at psychological boundaries between the two groups. I have sought to understand, by means of my own interviews and the secondary literature, the boundaries existing between the two groups, to what degree there was permeability and comfort between them, and “we” complemented “they.”

Although my data sample is small, it reveals some notable patterns. I closely examine representative descriptions, as well as particular and revealing anecdotes, situating them among the observations of historians. I have followed oral history collection techniques recommended by Paul Thompson, beginning with a “freer form of interviewing in order to explore the variety of responses obtainable” and following with “a standardized survey.”<sup>137</sup> All interviews were conducted in peoples’ homes. I often interviewed husbands and wives in tandem and spoke to approximately as many men as women. The majority of the interviewees were between the ages of 65-80 and had left Djerba in their teens or early twenties. I uniformly asked my informants to compare their lives in Djerba to their lives in Israel; this proved a fruitful starting point. I then asked more specific questions about their memories of interactions with Muslims.

The emigrants I interviewed are either from Djerba itself or come from Djerban satellite towns in Southern Tunisia. At the turn of the twentieth century, instead of sending periodic peddlers to other towns, Djerba exported groups of permanent settlers (craftsmen and traders) to the villages of Zarzis, Medenine, Tatahouine and Ben Gardane. These communities are founded almost wholly of migrants from Djerba, but are somewhat more dispersed within the Muslim population. The satellite towns do not share the enclosure of Djerba’s own community, and thus interactions between Jews and Muslims are more varied.

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<sup>137</sup> Thompson, 117.

Yet because the inhabitants of these towns were Djerban, I believe it is useful to examine the interviews together. There are also several interviews from Gabes, a nearby town.

I found myself in a beneficial “insider-outsider”<sup>138</sup> position. Although not half-Tunisian, I am Jewish and had lived in Djerba at length. My legitimacy was granted immediately: I spoke in Djerban Arabic dialect, and we knew many families in common. Most welcomed me unconditionally, offering hospitality and helping coordinate more interviews in the neighborhood. I was often queried about the level of my religiosity; I replied with the Tunisian Arabic phrase: *Nshid a’deen* (I practice or “hold fast to” the religion),<sup>139</sup> providing immediate reassurance to any who questioned my intentions.

My project encounters inevitable constraints as I have asked for narration of memories of a land left fifty years previously. As Thompson notes: “with interviews which go back further, there is the added possibility of distortions influenced by subsequent changes in values and norms, which may perhaps quite unconsciously alter perceptions.”<sup>140</sup> By looking for internal consistency within interviews and seeking confirmation from other interviews and from secondary sources, I hope to avoid some of the potential pitfalls inherent in the use of oral histories.

Many spoke nostalgically of Tunisia, while others spoke caustically of the country they had left. Their narrations of the Djerban Muslim population may well have been significantly impacted by their current feelings towards Muslims. The Djerbans are politically conservative supporters of the Likud (right wing Israeli coalition) party. My

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<sup>138</sup> Abu-Lughod, 1991, 173, notes the benefit of being a “halfie” anthropologist “whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage” in providing a unique insider/outsider perspective in fieldwork.

<sup>139</sup> “If...somebody has very strong views, especially from a minority standpoint, it may be essential to show a basic sympathy with them to get started at all.” Thompson, 202

<sup>140</sup> Thompson, 110.

research stint in Israel coincided with the withdrawal from Gaza (July, 2005), which every Djerban Jew I interviewed lamented as a tragedy; their messianic visions of the land require that it be inhabited solely by Jews. Despite problems of memory, and how an intervening political reality (or conversely, nostalgia) may have shaped that memory—I believe that these interviews help begin to reconstruct a lost reality in Djerba. Their analysis, and subsequent comparison with trends I encountered in 2003-5, may offer insight into the shift which I argue has occurred in Djerba in the past fifty years.

Abraham Udovitch, entitles his groundbreaking study of the community in 1984 The Last Arab Jews, noting the Jews' "Arabness." Geertz elaborates: "the Djerban Jews are as Maghrebian, in their fashion, as the hardiest Muslims, and as rooted in Tunisian culture. These are "Arab Jews" and they take about as much of their character from their surroundings as they do from their faith."<sup>141</sup> Geertz, notes the shared idiom of Djerban Jews and Muslims, overlapping in everything from "household organization," "sexual division of labor," "demographic structure," "legal forms," "aesthetic preferences" and "ideas of gender."<sup>142</sup> However, this embeddedness coexists, equally prominently, with the Jews' enclosure, and the knowledge of untraversable boundaries such as intermarriage.

Isaachar Ben Ami concurs, pointing to the "infiltration of local and regional customs" and "acculturation of the realities of life as a minority group." He states: "Jews were not a people who lived apart."<sup>143</sup> This integration illustrates the ability of a community, by choice insulated and "monoform," to construct a mobile and mutually beneficial path through the polyform society. But would the Jews continue to venture into that society with such

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<sup>141</sup> Geertz, 2.

<sup>142</sup> Geertz, 2.

<sup>143</sup> Ben Ami, 2003, 12.

conviction that they belonged there? With the creation of their mythic home into a State several decades later, they would transplant notions of home onto new soil. When the Jews believed themselves to belong in Djerba, they enacted this, and did indeed belong. Contrarily, they would later, in an explosion of political factors, perhaps *together* with the Muslim majority, forge the new myth of their un-belonging.

## **A Study of Pre-1948 Djerba**

### *1. Commercial Coexistence:*

I first examine the economic integration of the Djerban Jews, which was in full flower at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Jews had controlled most of the bazaar—not simply in their own villages, but in the Muslim capital Houmt Souq.<sup>144</sup> Itinerant Jewish peddlers and craftsmen circulated in surrounding Muslim villages selling manufactures, purchasing agricultural products and offering manifold services as carpenters, harness-makers, tailors and tinsmiths. The woolen textiles industry provides a window into division of niche labor by Jews and Muslims: Muslims raised the sheep, Jewish entrepreneurs sold the raw wool and also carded it. Spinning was the domain of the Muslims. The relationships between Jews and Muslims were “never those of employer and employee, but rather associative in nature, consisting of commissions, partnerships of various kinds and specific agreements for discrete transactions.”<sup>145</sup> Indeed, long-term (even multi-generational work) relationships are recorded. The craft of bucket-making in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is discussed in Boaz Haddad’s article in *Jerba Yehudit*, published in Jerusalem in 1978:

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<sup>144</sup> Geertez, 3; Udovitch, 101.

<sup>145</sup> Udovitch, 103.



The buckets for drawing water were made of leather... They were produced by Jews, and only the Jews were masters of this craft. These Jewish craftsmen were tied to their Arab customers for the entire year in order to maintain and repair the bucket for them. Each Jewish bucket-maker had a customary claim on the work for a particular Arab, one which passed from father to son. As compensation for his service, the Jewish craftsman was a kind of partner in the Arab's agricultural activity and received a certain percentage of the yield from him. At each season, the Arab would deliver this share to the very home of the Jew—be it a measure of millet or dates or barley or fruit. The Jew would in turn take the produce to be sold in the market of the Hara. The Jewish bucket-maker usually maintained such ties with more than one Arab. Even in the hottest days of the summer, he would travel to their estates and repair whatever was needed.<sup>146</sup>

Jews and Muslims of Djerba relied on each other profoundly, creating a web of interdependencies. Each craftsman and merchant occupied a known role, contingent upon others' fulfillment of *their* roles. Niche trades bound both individuals and family networks together. Mutual trust and willingness to assist the other was imperative. The result was both a logistical and an emotional series of bargains between the two groups.

My interviews illustrate several examples of cooperative work between Jews and Muslims of Djerba and its satellites at the outset of the 20th century. Several describe economic ventures between their families and those of Muslim families in the first half of the twentieth century. Batsheva, who emigrated from Zarzis in 1956 recounts: "My grandfather gave the Muslims money and they worked in the olive groves. Sometimes the Muslim kids showed disrespect to my grandfather. But this was unacceptable to both the Jews and the Muslims."<sup>147</sup> Batsheva's expectation, in line it seems with the expectations of those around her, was mutual respect and cooperation of the Jews and Muslims. An interviewee from Houmt Souq in Djerba notes the existence of cooperative ventures between the two groups, founded on trust: "Agriculture was the Arabs. Though there were financial collaborations. It

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<sup>146</sup> Boaz Haddad in Udovitch, 105.

<sup>147</sup> Batsheva Cohen, Lod, July 2005.

was a question of trust. The Arabs would work the land. The Jews would advance them the money.”<sup>148</sup> Udovitch has noted that Jews and Muslims on the island often worked together in the sphere of woolen fabrics. One Djerban man, who emigrated to Israel in the mid-fifties describes his family’s business: “My father was a tailor. He worked with Muslims. They ran the work on Shabbat. They help to make the blankets. They wove the burnous and the trousers.”<sup>149</sup> This example highlights the sensitivity of the Muslims to the Jews’ Sabbath abstention from work. Likewise, Jews would take over on Muslim holy days.

In 1902, forty percent of Jews were involved in generalized commerce (i.e. textiles and foodstuff), forty percent made their livings in traditional crafts (cobblers, bucket-makers, embroiderers) and fifteen percent occupied the typically Jewish trades of jeweler and money-lender.<sup>150</sup> However, over the course of the century, their versatility and mobility across commerce has diminished dramatically. I explore this shift, and what kind of business relationships later occurred between Djerba’s Jews and Muslims in this chapter’s latter half.

## *2. Religious Coexistence:*

Shlomo Deshen notes the “Arabism” of the Jews in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, arguing that the Jews were deeply integrated into their surroundings, espousing a decidedly positive attitude towards Islam.<sup>151</sup> He remarks upon the existence of only one or two violent incidents against the Jews of Djerba in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>152</sup> and stresses that Jewish Tunisian

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<sup>148</sup> Zachino Kabla, Paris, January 2006.

<sup>149</sup> A. Cohen, Tlamim, July 2005.

<sup>150</sup> Geertz, 3.

<sup>151</sup> Deshen, 2005, 2.

<sup>152</sup> Whereas, since 1970, there have been multiple violent incidents.

folktales gathered in the mid twentieth century reveal “more relaxed relations between Jews and non-Jews in Tunisia generally, than in other parts of North Africa.”<sup>153</sup>

Deshen analyzes the relationship between Jews and Muslims in this period through legal injunctions and decisions pronounced by sages, especially those of Rebbe Khalfon. For example, Khalfon requires that one immediately return any items lost by non-Jews because they, like fellow Jews, “believe in the unity of God.”<sup>154</sup> Indeed, a general sense of religious empathy should be expressed. If a Jew hears a Muslim utter a blessing upon smelling fragrant herbs, he should second the blessing by uttering “Amen!” The justification is, again, that the Muslims also “believe in the unity of God.” Rebbe Khalfon even consulted a senior Rabbi in Tunis to get a second opinion. The elder concurred that if the Muslim’s blessing was genuinely pointed towards Heaven and “not uttered in flippancy,” one should join with an Amen. Even more remarkable is the authorization of Djerban butchers in explicitly uttering a Muslim blessing. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Rabbi blessing the kosher meat would add “Allahu Akbar” to make the meat equally fit for Muslim consumption. This did not pose thorny theological questions: both blessings were a form of praising God, and were even understood as synonymous.<sup>155</sup> The Jews, without threat to their integrity, could appreciate their faith’s overlap with Islam. Muslims were not in themselves *dangerous* per se; Jews, always aware of their differences could appreciate that Muslims had their own ritual purity laws. The act of blessing, of consecrating a thing as holy, and separating it from the mundane, could even in certain moments, be shared. As Muslims

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<sup>153</sup> Deshen, 2005, 16.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*, 17.

<sup>155</sup> *ibid*, 19.

had often appreciated Jews for their monotheism, the Jews could perhaps now feel sufficiently comfortable and unthreatened to reciprocate.

Batsheva, who left Zarzis in 1956, describes the relationship between the Rabbi of the town and the Muslim population:

“My grandfather, a Rabbi, used to bless the Muslim children. He was a very good person. He would offer money to the children. He was very generous. Once he went to the market to buy peppers. The Muslim child assisting the shopkeeper said: ‘stop touching, you can’t keep touching everything.’ A scene was created. The child’s father said: ‘What have you done to the Rabbi of the Jews?’ The Muslim child said: ‘he was touching, touching!’ The father said: ‘You have to apologize to the Rabbi of the Jews. Of course you must touch if you are going to buy.’ So he did, he knocked on the Rabbi’s door later and excused himself.”<sup>156</sup>

The Rabbi’s willingness to deliver blessings to non-Jews suggests his respect of the faith of Islam and his general comfort with Muslims. The Muslims’ willingness to receive those blessings hints that they esteemed the Rabbi as a holy man. The clash between Muslim child and Rabbi illustrates a breach of codes and resulting shame. The Muslim child’s father admonishes him: “What have you done to the Rabbi of the Jews?” The child’s behavior is understood to be inappropriate and disrespectful of a venerable elder. The father defends the actions of the Rabbi (“of course you must touch if you are going to buy”), and he demands that his child redress his wrong by apologizing. The shame experienced by the Rabbi must be cancelled out by the shame the child is induced to feel. The act of apology is a seeking of balance: mutual respect must be regained between the Jewish and Muslim communities.

### *3. Psychological Boundaries:*

I now examine psychological boundaries between the Muslims and Jews of Djerba in this time period. I do so realizing that memory is a shifting and multifaceted entity, remade

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<sup>156</sup> Batsheva Cohen, Lod, July 2005.

through the lens of new experiences. Descriptions of Djerban Muslims by Jews who have lived in Israel for fifty years will likely be colored by their experiences of Palestinians. Their own politics in Israel (every Djerban emigrant I encountered was conservative and oriented towards the right) may have sway in how they evoke their pasts.

One general trend among my interviewees was defining Jewish-Muslim relations as superior in Tunisia to those in Israel. Shoshana, who came to Israel from Zarzis in 1956, stated: “There were no problems at all with the Muslims. We bought and sold, we all met in the center. There were no attacks. But here, the Muslims! No, we do not like the Muslims here.”<sup>157</sup> Nissan Parparas, (from Gabes, a nearby town in the South) who came to Israel in the early fifties, concurred: “Tunisia was better than Israel! The Arabs with the Jews. All together. My father said this! They visited them in their homes! Here it is not the same. We are all afraid of leaving our homes. There we had a nice shop. The Arabs would buy from us.”<sup>158</sup> The Sefer family, who came in 1966 from Djerba, voiced the same sentiments: Amos Sefer explained: “We came because it was the government of the Arabs. Though life was nicer there. The people were good. Not like the Arabs in Israel.” His wife Hanna echoed her husband then added: “the Jews and Arabs did not live together, of course, each one on his own, but they were friends.”<sup>159</sup>

It is not surprising that the description of Jews and Muslims in Gabes, a nearby, larger town in the South, offers a slightly warmer picture of relations between the two groups. Visiting in homes would be more difficult to imagine in Djerba, which has historically been more insular. Also, whereas in Gabes, Jews were more dispersed through the population, in

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<sup>157</sup> Shoshana Cohen, Netivot, July 2005.

<sup>158</sup> Nissan Parparas, Netivot, July 2005.

<sup>159</sup> Hanna and Amos Sefer, Netivot, July 2005.

the Haras of Djerba, they formed more cohesive and enclosed villages. However, the Sefer couple from Djerba emphasizes that although Jews and Muslims did not live together, Jews and Muslims were *friends*. Framing relations as “friendships” contrasts to later descriptions of interactions between the groups.

In these descriptions of contrast between Muslims of Tunisia and those of Israel one could imagine the oversimplification (and even the creation of a binary) of the issue, especially after fifty years of shaping new—and violent—impressions of Muslims within Israel. However, many descriptions of the situation in Djerba and Southern Tunisia continue along this same vein without forming contrast to Israel. Zahara Parparas, from Gabes, who emigrated in the early 1950s noted: “We lived well with the Arabs. My father had a shop and the Arabs would buy from us.”<sup>160</sup> Abraham Boucharis remembers: “When I was in Djerba, the Muslims were our friends.”<sup>161</sup> I asked thereafter if this friendship was in work or in life, and he replied: “in everything. It wasn’t very difficult.” Again, ease of interaction between the two groups is highlighted.

In some cases, it was emphasized that Jews and Muslims inhabited the same sphere. Abraham Cohen, who left Djerba in the mid 1950s notes: “Our lifestyle was like the lifestyle of the Arabs. Yes, we had Arab friends.”<sup>162</sup> Shuda, who emigrated from Tetahouine in the same period describes her childhood there: “No we weren’t afraid of [the Muslims]. We wore the same clothes as them. Yes, Muslim friends. Or, friends of my fathers.”<sup>163</sup> Her mention of the wearing of the “same clothes” suggests that neither group was excessively preoccupied with creating external signals of differentiation.

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<sup>160</sup> Zahara Parapares, Netivot, July 2005.

<sup>161</sup> Abraham Boucharis, July 2005.

<sup>162</sup> A. Cohen, Tlamim, July 2005.

<sup>163</sup> Shuda Gapsy, Tlamim, July 2005.

Zachino, who left Djerba for Paris in 1984, describes his youth in the fifties. He lived in Houmt Souq, Djerba's capital, in which Jews were interspersed among Muslims: "When we were young, there were really Arabs who were almost Jews. When they spoke, you would think they were Jews. The Arab children would even come with us to the yeshiva. They were real neighbors. We knew their grandparents. They were real friends. The Arabs would sell us milk right from the goats. This has disappeared, but because of modernity."<sup>164</sup> Not only, according to his memories, did Jews and Muslims inhabit the same general landscape, they crossed into each others' more private spheres. His friendship group was a mixed one, to such a degree that Jewish colloquial phrases were adopted by Muslims. He notes that he knew the grandparents of his friends: the connection extended beyond schoolboy friendships, more profoundly into entire family networks. The connections were constituted by real feeling and mutual trust: "These were real friendships. We left the house open in Houmt Souq. Sometimes people would steal though not often. If you were stolen from, it was not because you were a Jew. It is a very specific thing, the relationship between the Arab and the Jew. Of course there are no mixed marriages. But the relationships were more than work." Zachino did not feel targeted as a Jew. He seemed to feel that his Jewishness was appreciated by Muslims. Zachino's memories diverge profoundly from descriptions of professional and personal relationships at the end of the same century.

Ilon, who left Burdogan in 1962, speaks of the town's Rabbi mediating small disputes between Jews and Muslims: "If there was a problem between a Jew and a Muslim, they would bring it before the Rabbi. He would listen to this one, and then to this one, and then he

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<sup>164</sup> Zachino Kabla, Paris, January 2006.

would give his answer.” Muslims attributed credibility to the verdict of the Rabbi suggesting ample trust and respect between the groups at this time.

In several incidents, Muslims came to the aid of Jews in their times of need. Abraham Cohen, who left Djerba in the mid fifties, remembers the assistance of a Muslim during an emergency: “There were scorpions. We would kill them. Once, one was in the mattress of my brother’s bed. He was bitten. They looked for the medicine of the Arabs. A country remedy. Milk from the camel. An Arab came to bring him this.”<sup>165</sup> There was a mutual acknowledgement between the two groups that each had a particular niche of expertise. Djerban Muslims were more associated with agriculture and livestock, a connection to the land; it was perhaps reasonable to seek the assistance of a Muslim for a “country remedy.” Shuda describes essential occasions of Muslim aid in times of need: “Once a Muslim saved a Jewish child falling down a hill. If not for the Muslim, the child would have died.”<sup>166</sup> When the Germans passed through Tunisia in 1942, Shuda recounts how her family took refuge in Muslim dwellings until the Germans departed:

When the Germans came, we knew nothing of the Germans. We didn’t know what to think. So we went to the caves. Where the Muslims lived. We went from one cave to another. For three days. While the Germans were passing through. We were in hiding. Life there in the caves was dirty. It was messy. There were tics. In the morning, no water. We wanted coffee, we went to the Muslims. We drank coffee under the trees. They brought water. Fatima brought eggs.<sup>167</sup>

This is ostensibly the first time Shuda has entered a Muslim home. Although she first describes the Muslim dwellings as alien (dirty, messy), she then reframes the experience, remembering the hospitality she received therein. The Germans are an uncategorizable other; representing danger. The Muslims by contrast, although different from the Jews, became a

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<sup>165</sup> A. Cohen, Tlamim, July 2005.

<sup>166</sup> Shuda Gapsy, Tlamim, July 2005.

<sup>167</sup> Shuda Gapsy, Tlamim, July 2005.



pole of familiarity here. It is the *local* Muslims in this case who provide a buffer zone against a more distant and foreboding Other.

Most interviewees recalled that mutual respect between Jews and Muslims of Djerba was the norm; those I have referenced above spoke more energetically of interactions between the two groups. However, a number of interviewees spoke more ambivalently, and even with hostility about relations. Ilon tells of his wife's recent visit to Djerba: "I didn't go. I don't really want to go. I don't like the Arabs, it is just that way."<sup>168</sup> However, later when discussing his childhood, he said of the Muslims: "I studied with them in school. They were my friends." Within the same half hour, he expressed great discomfort around Muslims, and then memories of early friendships with them. Ilon did not waver between the two; rather, he expressed each reality fully in turn. Perhaps remembered comfort has been mediated by years of discomfort around the Arab population in Israel. Louisa, who left Djerba in 1948, spoke in less hazy terms:

"I don't know if I miss the Hara. I don't like the Arabs at all. I came when I was seventeen. I came pregnant. But when I gave birth to my first son, I was in the Hara. There were Arabs, we were afraid. We were all girls in my house. My father was very afraid for us. There was not a single boy. He didn't want us to go out at all. We didn't go out. Now that we are in Israel, there is no more fear. Nothing. You come, you go, there is nothing to be afraid of. There it was Arabs, Arabs, Arabs. Everyone was afraid."<sup>169</sup>

For Louisa, the Muslims of the Hara were a threatening presence. As a girl, without a brother in the house to protect her and her sisters, she felt herself to be particularly vulnerable. In Israel, by contrast, she did not have to worry about these alarming Others. She frames her fear as an inverse to previous comparisons between the Muslims of Tunisia and of Israel. For her, Muslims were more potentially dangerous in Tunisia, a land where she did not feel herself to be at home. In Israel, however, even though there were Muslims, she felt that her security

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<sup>168</sup> Ilon Khalfon, Ofakim, July 2005.

<sup>169</sup> Louisa Boucharis, Betigadi, July 2005.

was assured by being in the country she felt was her own. She later elaborates upon this dichotomy of threat and security:

“Muslims like to bother and harm you. Who will discipline them? Who? They do everything to the Jews. But not here. If they do something, there is someone to take charge against them. We have God, who governs all. And the government.

Louisa did not feel that Tunisia offered her ease or recourse to security. In Israel, she feels she has the blessing and protection of both God and of the government. Gad, who left Djerba in 1963, echoes this sentiment: “I saw how Jews behaved with the Arabs in Djerba. ‘*Oh Sidi, what can I do for you. I am a Jew. I stay in my place. O Sidi, go ahead.*’ Arabs weren’t good to Jews. They took our money. Why should I be beneath them? They said come here, and I came. The police there were not ours.”<sup>170</sup> For Gad, living in Tunisia entails a hierarchy where Jews have to pander to Muslims, are made to feel inferior, and don’t have recourse to power structures. For Louisa too, it is Israel which provides this empowerment; moreover, in her messianic framework, it is the single place which assures redemption: “There is nothing like Israel. Once all the Jews are in Israel, and they come from everywhere, from America too, the Messiah will come. And the Arabs must leave one by one, so we are not afraid.”<sup>171</sup> Louisa understands her presence in the land is part of fulfilling a greater project. Meanwhile, she understands the presence of the Arabs in Israel to work actively *against* that project.

My interviews offer a variety of contradictory perspectives. They also display certain consistent trends which I can locate within the secondary literature. In the first half of the 20th century, commercial cooperation between the two groups was not only a norm, but was indispensably part of the tissue of daily interaction. Not only religious tolerance, but mutual religious appreciation and respect were typical. Although friendships between

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<sup>170</sup> Gad Mazel, Ashkelon, July 2005.

<sup>171</sup> Louisa Boucharis, Betigadi, July 2005.

Muslims and Jews were not uniform, they do not seem to be uncommon. Most, despite having *chosen* to leave Djerba (or Southern Tunisia) attest to their memories of comfort within it. Batsheva narrates her childhood; although her memories sound nostalgic, they perhaps reveal a general truth: “I remember everything from Zarzis. My friends and the school and the sea. It was so lovely there in the morning. We would have fresh fish always for lunch. The way things tasted there!” She then transitions into her family’s decision to emigrate to Israel: “Then everyone wanted to go to Israel. It wasn’t because of fear. It wasn’t because we thought the Muslims would kill us! We had friends among them.”<sup>172</sup> For Batsheva, both her young life in Zarzis and her departure for Israel were natural. She had felt “home” in Zarzis. Then, with the creation of Israel, the mythical home became real. Once Israel was real, they “wanted to go” there. Yet Batsheva’s vivid descriptions of Zarzis suggest that her first home still holds considerable emotional resonance.

### **A Study of Post-1948 Djerba**

I was positioned more decisively as an “outsider” in relation to the Djerban community in Djerba, necessitating a different approach to the collection of interviews. My presence in Djerba was baffling and uncomfortable for the Jewish community; indeed, I do not believe the community would have interacted with me at all had I not been Jewish.<sup>173</sup> I was told that an unmarried woman of my age could not reside within the Hara. I first moved into a hotel in Houmt Souq, the capital of the island; after several weeks, I found an apartment rented out by a Muslim family inside the Hara. Many Jewish families questioned

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<sup>172</sup> Batsheva Cohen, Lod, Israel. July 2005.

<sup>173</sup> After living in the Hara for a month, I announced that an American (Christian) friend might visit. Many reacted with discomfort about bringing a non-Jew into the Hara.

my loyalties. Interactions were predicated on the *sharedness* of our Judaism. I was frequently asked about my practice of Judaism in America.

Whereas I conducted all twenty interviews in Israel on tape, the many more interviews and informal conversations I conducted in Djerba (over multiple extended visits) are reconstructed (on the same day as the conversations occurred) in my notes. The community in Djerba was uncomfortable being recorded and reacted suspiciously when I took notes during conversations. I was able to interact most meaningfully with females and spoke extensively to Djerban girls and women of different ages, both individually and in groups.<sup>174</sup> My study is necessarily limited by the gender strictures of Orthodox Judaism in a particularly insular setting,<sup>175</sup> however, after several months I could speak to the husbands of my female friends in their homes. I asked them generally about their lives in Djerba, and about the nature of their interactions with Muslims. My proposition in this chapter, the comparison of two groups which are not perfectly parallel<sup>176</sup> (as well as the comparison of memory and living experience) is inherently limited. Regardless, I still believe it is a fruitful and revealing exercise and may offer certain important (if qualified) insights about the community's shift over time.

For example, whereas my interviewees who had left Djerba in the early fifties called the Djerban Muslim population both "Arab" and "Muslim," Djerban Jews now solely call

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<sup>174</sup> I regularly spoke to about 10 school-aged and 15-20 teenaged girls, and about 6 young married women, 8-10 middle aged women and about 5 middle-aged men. I spoke sporadically to a much larger cross-section of the community; I have included here only the most representative and relevant interviews.

<sup>175</sup> By contrast, I was often able to speak to Djerban Jewish men in Israel. As the community did not feel itself to be a minority on the defensive, it had relaxed some of its strictures.

<sup>176</sup> This is the case in gender and in age. I was able to interview more men in Israel than in Djerba as the community was less strict. I also interviewed mostly elders in Israel with remaining memories of Djerba whereas I interviewed a broader age group in Djerba.

Djerban Muslims “Arabs,” conflating ethnicity and religion. Does this shift in naming indicate the Jews are increasingly distancing themselves from Arabness? “Arab” for the Djerban Jew has come to connote the threatening other. “Arab” stands for local Djerban Tunisian Arabs, Palestinian Arabs and the broader Arab world, which the Jews perceive to be against the State of Israel. Many Djerban Jews have become acutely aware of news emanating from Israel. The majority have sought access to Israeli channels on their satellite televisions. Some listen to the news in Hebrew, and the latest political developments in Israel are fodder for conversation among all social groups. I argue that this connection to Israel has, for many Djerban Jews, eclipsed their connection to Djerba; they have come to think of Djerba as a non-home. They have come to see their existence within it as fundamentally characterized by a lack. The particular strain of Zionism which captivated the Djerban Jews asked for a mystical fulfillment of their peoplehood on a (from afar) still mystical land. For the first time, their shared abstract fate, reuniting with other Jews in the Holy Land had become a concrete possibility; upon this shift, they believed their “we” could only be realized on the site of that fate.

### *1. Commercial Coexistence:*

I first examine, in parallel to the first section of the chapter, commercial relations between Jews and Muslims in Djerba, and how they have evolved. As previously stated, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, forty percent of Jews were involved in generalized commerce, forty percent made their livings in traditional crafts and fifteen percent were jewelers and money-lenders.<sup>177</sup> However, over the course of the century, the Jews’ versatility

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<sup>177</sup> Geertz, 3; Udovitch, 106-9.

and mobility across commerce has reduced greatly. In 1978, by contrast, only ten percent worked in commerce, twenty percent had occupations in traditional crafts, and sixty percent worked in the Jewish employments of jewelry and money-lending. The Muslim population was no longer dependent on the Jews for many necessary niche skills. Geertz suggests that this shift is an unnerving indication of where the Jews are (and are not) now situated in Tunisian society. He explains the nature of their shift to the peripheries:

The cosmopolitan side of Jewish life—in which if they were not precisely like everyone else, they were at least among everyone else, striking deals and forming alliances—is dissolving. And with it is dissolving the sense—theirs and that of their neighbors—that, distinctive as they may be, they belong where they are.<sup>178</sup>

Yet, cooperative economic ventures still exist between Jews and Muslims in Djerba: A middle aged man explains: “they are not official, there are no cooperative organizations, but there are examples of Jews and Arabs working together.” One young woman confirms: “Yes, there are cases—where each put in half, or one puts in the capital. I have heard of cases.” In 2004, there were some evident cases of collaborative work. Goel, a young Jewish man, was associated with a Muslim in a pizzeria, and that the benefits were: “fifty/ fifty.” The son of a Rabbi employed Muslims in his clothing shop in Houmt Souq. Alex, in his mid twenties, employed Muslim assistants in his cell phone shop. During Jewish holidays and Sabbath, the Muslims took over the enterprises. Alternately, Muslims did not work on Fridays, their own holy day of the week. There were cases of Jews and Muslims working together and of Muslims who worked for Jews, but none of Jews working beneath Muslims. Sufficiently financially comfortable in Djerba, Jews did not have to work under a Muslim and to do so would have been socially unacceptable.

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<sup>178</sup> Geertz, 3.

Although cooperative ventures were not abnormal between the Jews and Muslims, there is no longer a network of profound interdependencies. Muslims work professions once held exclusively by Jews and no longer seek out Jewish expertise in certain fields of commerce and textiles. They have even entered jewelry-making and selling, once solely the province of the Jews. Muslims can now purchase their wedding trousseaus from Muslim shops in the capital. The intimacy and loyalty involved in obtaining such items from Jewish shops is still part of Djerba's legacy; it is not, as it once was, the rule.

## *2. Religious Coexistence:*

The Jews and the Muslims of Djerba now seem to coexist religiously, but pay less personal deference to each others' faiths and men of religion. Religious tolerance is instituted by the law, and its breach is severely punished. Ben Ali portrays Tunisia as a state of religious tolerance, and his government even pays the salary of the Grand Rabbi of Tunis.<sup>179</sup> Tunisia has severely cracked down on Islamist movements in the last thirty years, suppressing veins of Islam opposed to religious pluralism. Moreover, since a series of unfortunate incidents, Bourguiba and then Ben Ali have been scrupulous about the protection of the Jewish community. In 1985, four Jews worshipping inside the Ghriba synagogue were murdered by local Muslims. In 2002, an al-Qaeda linked bombing at the entrance wall of the al-Ghriba synagogue killed 17 German tourists, but none of the Jewish population. As a result, all synagogues in Tunisia are now flanked by police. Moreover, since the 1990s, Djerbans have been permitted to return to Tunisia from Israel. Although consulates set up by

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<sup>179</sup> Alfassa, online posting at [www.sephardiccouncil.org/index.html](http://www.sephardiccouncil.org/index.html).

Israel and Tunisia in 1996 were closed after the outset of the Intifada, the Tunisian government has since eliminated obstacles to Israeli entry in the country.

This said, despite religious *tolerance*, there is little if any actual warm religious exchange. A Rabbi blessing Muslim children in the streets of Djerba would today be inconceivable. The blessing could neither be comfortably offered by the Rabbi nor comfortably received by the Muslims. Deshen's remarkable examples of Rabbis blessing kosher meat adding "Allahu Akbar" at the end to make the meat equally fit for Muslim consumption would also be difficult to imagine today. Indeed, an acute sensitivity to the privileging of certain Jewish terms over Muslim terms has developed among Jews. In expressing gratitude, the Djerban Jew will use the Hebrew phrase for "thanks be to God," *Baruch Hashem*, and never the Arabic equivalent, *ElHamdulilah*. Every time I used the Arabic phrase with a Jew, I was chastised: "That is what the Arabs say! What, are you an Arab?" Zachino's memory of Muslim children accompanying Jews to their yeshiva remains bounded within its time. Moreover, the Purim festival offering of alms and sweets to the Muslim community has become obsolete. Examples of religious exchange, once not uncommon, are now increasingly rare in Djerba. As both Jews and Muslims have retreated into their own religions, forums of sharing and mutual appreciation have nearly disappeared.

### *3. Psychological Boundaries:*

I now examine psychological boundaries which may have developed between the Jews and Muslims of Djerba in the past fifty years. I first focus on interaction and exchange between the two groups, and how these are narrated. I look at how Djerban Jews discuss their



own attachments and notions of belonging or not-belonging in Djerba. I then compare these descriptions to how the Djerbans seem to now relate to Israel.

However, these shifts do not occur in a vacuum. Particularly after the PLO operated out in Tunis in the eighties<sup>180</sup> and since the Intifada's outbreak, Djerban Muslims have empathized with Palestinians' plight. Many, along with the growing trend in the Middle East, have also come to see the West as collaborating against the Arab world, and view Jews as part of this project. Meanwhile, the Jews of Djerba sympathize acutely with Israel and support (to a degree) the Bush administration's policy there.<sup>181</sup> Feelings of un-belonging among the Djerban Jews are intimately connected to these broader political sensitivities.

18-year-old Nissia notes that the situation has become tenser in her lifetime:

Things have changed very much. After the Intifada. The Palestinian issue has controlled the whole situation. We had a subject in an exam once in our [mixed] school. You were supposed to write a letter to a Palestinian boy and tell him to be patient. It was very difficult for the Tunisian Jews. One left the paper blank. I wrote about Hitler and the six million souls. You were supposed to write against the Jews, that was the assignment. I wrote using the history of the Jews.<sup>182</sup>

External realities have certainly altered for the Jews of Djerba, yet a larger structure of loyalties has created *conceptual internal* shifts for the Jewish community. The Hara has become, more so, an island within an island. The Jews have defensively retreated into an almost anxious adherence to ritual purity laws to maintain boundaries, and feel a profound attachment to a Home located elsewhere. I now explore a series of interactions between Jews

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<sup>180</sup> Arafat's presence in Tunis in this period perhaps triggered heightened consciousness of the Palestinian situation among Tunisian Muslims.

<sup>181</sup> Djerban Jews opposed Bush's support for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and qualified withdrawal from the West Bank. However, they appreciate the Bush administration's general stance of support for Israel.

<sup>182</sup> Nissia Z, moshav Betigadi, left Djerba for Israel in 2003; July 2005.

and Muslims of the Hara, which point to a general Jewish feeling that Djerba is simply not a viable “home,” and they do not feel “at home” residing there.

First, the case of Muslims speaking in Djerban Jewish dialect in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century would not likely be replicated in Djerba today. The linguistic barrier between Jews and Muslims in Djerba is subtle though pronounced. Djerban Jewish dialect varies in pronunciation<sup>183</sup> and in vocabulary from the Muslims’ dialect, and is laced with Hebrew. Some core verbs and adjectives are divergent: for the verb “to be able to,” the Jews say *tgiddi*; Muslims prefer *tnajumi*. Upon using the opposite verb in each context, I received startled reactions. A Muslim cabdriver noted that I was Jewish. A group of 16-year-old Jewish girls looked frightened to hear me use the verb of the Muslims, and questioned my loyalties. Pronouns also differ: for familiar and collective “you,” Jews say *ntin/ ntun*, and Muslims, *nti /ntum*. Jews use the term of endearment *aazi* for small children; Muslims say *azizi*. To express much or many, Jews say *borsa*, Muslims, *barsha*,

Not even a brief conversation can be conducted without continual reminders of difference. One woman who had never attended a mixed school, expressed irritation that she could not understand when the Muslims spoke: “Everyone [from our community] who goes to their schools learns how to speak like them. Me, I have no idea.” A Muslim hairdresser said, “No, we all understand each other. There is no real difference in our speech.” In reply, her younger assistant imitated the Jewish womens’ coo to their babies: “Aazi! Aazi!” While the dialects of the groups have always been distinct, a shift in attitudes has attached stigma to the use of the other group’s dialect. Although some Jews make adjustments to their word choice and pronunciation when interacting with Muslim customers, this was not the norm.

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<sup>183</sup> Jews often pronounce the letter sin as “sh,” in contrast to Muslim pronunciation of “s.”

Many Jews of the Hara used Hebrew words selectively so that Muslims could not understand. They often called the Muslims of the Hara “ilGoyim,” the Hebrew word for non-Jew<sup>184</sup> (which has acquired a pejorative connotation), and children and teenagers switched into Hebrew when near Muslims. The use of Muslim words has become taboo, in the sense of Mary Douglas’ use of the term. Using *only* Jewish words is an attempt to keep the groups discrete, and thus to “[protect] the distinctive categories of the universe.”<sup>185</sup>

Linguistic barriers have ossified in Djerba; so too have boundaries in dress and self-presentation. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shuda points to the general similarity in (modest) dress between Jews and Muslims; in 2004, Jews and Muslims of Djerba wear distinctly different, even mutually-alienating clothes. Jewish girls wear long skirts and long sleeves, and upon marriage, cover their hair. Most of the Muslim girls do not choose revealing ensembles but wear trousers and rarely cover their hair. Wearing the hijab has become almost obsolete for Tunisian Muslims, except for elders. There are thus immediate physical signals which distinguish Jews from Muslims on the island. The occasional movement of Djerban women and girls out of the Hara and into the Muslim market space of Houmt Souq creates subtle ripples of notice among Muslims. Although the Jews are known to be Djerban, they occupy specific coordinates on Djerba, within the Jewish Haras. The feeling of not belonging *outside* the Hara is generally widespread among Djerban Jews; some, however, do not believe they belong inside it either. That unbelonging is perhaps mutually reinforced by both the Jews and Muslims of Djerba.

In one instance, Savite, 16-years-old, took me to a Muslim-owned supermarket at the Hara’s edge to help me buy provisions. As we entered, she clutched my elbow and hissed in

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<sup>184</sup> Goy in Hebrew means “nation” or “people.” It is also colloquially refers to non-Jews.

<sup>185</sup> Douglas, xi.

my ear: “They don’t like us. We have to get our things and leave fast!” We crossed through the many aisles as Savite appeared to be anxious and unhappy. She sanctioned only the purchase of the cheapest cleaning products: “Why should we give them our money?” and refused all the local food available, only putting a single package of crackers into my cart. She scrutinized the crackers carefully, even though the same crackers are sold in the Hara. According to Savite, the crackers were the only items we could trust in the store to be Kosher. Savite’s profound discomfort in the Muslim environment, and her desire to evade all interaction were narrated through her fear. She was afraid to be alone (two girls by themselves) and afraid to be in a setting of the “Arabs.” Savite avoided interaction with Muslims in the Hara scrupulously. She assumed “they did not like her,” and articulated her discomfort and dislike of them.

Savite was always conscious of boundaries and purity. Although there were other items in the store which would be deemed kosher (like fresh fruit and vegetables), the assumption was contamination until proven pure. The crackers she suggested were sanctioned by the High Rabbi of Tunis, and were pre-wrapped. Everything else was porous, subject to the un-kosher and thus unclean, touch of the Others. For Savite, there were circumscribed safe zones and danger or “taboo” zones. She did not feel safe, at ease, and thus did not feel “at home” at a grocery store a five minute walk from her own house.

This same sense of peril was expressed in reference to Muslim homes in the Hara. I rented an apartment above the home of a Muslim family, and the Jews of the village expressed surprise and distaste. Many asked if I was afraid and would not approach my home. A group of several girls (aged 15-17) was particularly anxious and adamantly refused my invitation to visit my home. Standing nearby one day, smells of cooking emanated from the

Muslim house. The girls cringed and one said: “No we won’t come in. We don’t like the way it smells. The smell of the Goyim’s cooking, chiiii, it makes me sick to my stomach. I’m afraid to go in. Why aren’t you afraid?” The threshold of the Muslim home was an impossible boundary to traverse without compromising themselves. Even *smelling* un-Kosher food made them feel they had transgressed. They would sidestep areas of the Hara with higher concentrations of Muslims to avoid such moments. Avoiding the spatial or linguistic realm of the Others meant protecting and articulating the community’s own realm. Each upholding of a taboo, was an assertion of self; the neglect of these taboos would have alternately created a felt dissolution of that self.

Doly, a fifty-year-old Djerban Jew who is fervently attached to Israel, and particularly vehement in her discomfort in Djerba explains: “I have lived here. I am not proud of my culture. I did not spend happy times here. This place did not treat me well.” Interestingly, Doly recognizes that she is a product of a composite culture, and that she cannot deny that she *comes from* an Arab milieu. She acknowledges both that she is *of* this place, and that this place has not treated her well. Perhaps this accounts for the forcefulness of her descriptions, and for the dividedness at her core. It is not enough to display indifference to an alienating milieu; perhaps because she recognizes the degree to which she is steeped within it, her rejection must be more complete. Doly speaks of her alienation from her first language—and indeed from the cultural legacy of Arab civilization: “I hate Arabic. I use it to get by. There is no good Arabic literature. French literature, yes. Hebrew, yes.”

Doly claims there are only two Muslims she has ever trusted. The first is Anis, a young friend of her aunt’s from Houmt Souq, the capital of Djerba. She considers Anis to be polite, literate and lovely. The other Muslim she trusts “converted to Judaism. Not when he

married a Jewish woman, but later, thereafter.<sup>186</sup> He had boils and dreamt he went to Jordan and was healed. Before going he promised that if healed, he would convert to Judaism. Both followed—he went and was healed. He became deeply religious, *more religious than us*, and eventually the wife could reconcile with her family as they saw the religiosity of her husband. And his skin was dark—he wasn't even one of the lighter Arabs. This one, I could respect.” For Doly, trust and respect for Muslims were absolutely out of the ordinary. In the latter example, it is only through trials by water and fire, and an ultimate casting off of Islam and otherness that the man gains her trust. Although that trust was earned through conversion to Judaism, there are still marks of her feelings of distance, expressed in racist idiom.

Doly's perception of un-belonging in Djerba is often bound up in her feelings towards not only the Muslim population of the Hara, but of her more general conception of Muslims. Her sentiments seem to be filtered through the lens of her attachment to Israel. For Doly “Arabs” are a danger and an impediment to Jewish flourishing in the Holy Land. When she speaks of “the Arabs,” she does so globally. Her feelings about the Muslim population in the Hara are clearly informed by the emotions behind her politics: “The Arabs are overtaking the world. How will the Jews, who outlived the Moabites, and all the ancient tribes—so tenacious the Jew is—survive? Out of a million, maybe maybe 20 good honest Arabs. Their character is not honest. I know. I have lived here. You cannot trust them. They all take four wives, have 10 children each and overtake the world.” Doly's core fear seems to be the engulfing of the Jewish people. She fears their inability to survive cohesively—either in diaspora (Djerba) or territorially (Israel). Her denigration of Arabs seems to become a coping mechanism. Doly is reflecting upon her discomfort in Djerba, but she is also expressing a

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<sup>186</sup> This example of intermarriage is very anomalous for a religious Tunisian Jew and was condemned by the Jewish community.

solidarity with Jews she believes are in threatened situations. I believe her current venomous feelings towards Muslims stem both from her more proactive seeing of Israel as “home” and her resulting distancing from her surrounding environment. She differentiates between her feelings for Tunisia and Israel: “Yes, this is my country (Tunisia), but that is my house (Israel). Why should I share my house? It’s mine. Denying Israel is spitting on your mother and father.” Intimacy towards Israel has trumped connection to Djerba, and has made Doly’s true ease around the Muslims in her neighborhood impossible.

Another trend among the Hara’s Jews was to first speak with neighborly respect of the Muslims, but to later articulate the ultimate barriers between the groups. Doly introduced me to a Muslim of the Hara, Neziha Benjamia, and asked if I could rent the apartment above her home. In the period leading up to this agreement, Doly repeatedly referred to Neziha as “a good woman,” and said that Neziha would also describe Doly as “a good woman.” When I asked if they were friends, Doly said: “We have known each other for years. Are we friends? No.” Later, Doly would say less kind things about Neziha: “She is not honest at all. She just wants your rent money. No, I don’t think she is particularly good. You can never trust the goyim; don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Alex, Doly’s son, treated Muslims in a neighborly, even friendly fashion, yet later articulated different feelings. Alex owned a popular cellphone shop at the entrance of the Hara two years ago and recently moved his shop to Houmt Souq to facilitate access of his Muslim customers to his shop. His relationship with them seemed warm and fraternal. He slapped Muslim guys on the shoulder and even flirted with some of the Muslim girls, who in turn flirted back. He gave them rides in his car, called them “brother” or “sister” and grinned at them upon parting. However, when asked later if these customers were his friends, Alex

said: “Of course not! I know all of them, I have grown up with all of them, and they would stab you in the back. They have their thing, we have ours. Anyway, their heads are all full of water. That’s the only reason the Jews of the Hara have survived this long.” Ostensible surface comfort covered not only deep mistrust but old wounds. Alex told me a story of his schooldays when a group of Muslims he had assumed to be his friends had made a scathing comment about Alex being a Jew. Whereas in my first set of interviews, recalling pre-1948 Djerba, examples of friendships had not been uncommon, not a single Jew I interviewed in the Hara in 2003-5 ever described Muslims as their *ashaab* (friends). Muslims, so frequently the source of discomfort and feelings of unbelonging in their own small village, were to be tolerated in a neighborly fashion.

Alite, a young married woman with two children articulates this feeling of unbelonging, which seems to be connected to difference and separateness:

No, this place, we are not comfortable here. This place is not mine. There is no moment when I don’t feel different. I was at the hair dresser and she had a plate of food and offered me some. I had to say no, I don’t eat that. I am here but I don’t want to be. But no, we don’t have any plan to leave. Here, we will always be foreign, always be strange. Even though we have been here for thousands of years, this will never change. People don’t think we belong here. We don’t see ourselves as belonging here.

Alite emphasizes that even though the Jews have been a very longstanding presence on the island—indeed according to the Djerban Jews, for two millennia—there is a sense of difference and alienation which cannot be bridged. She recognizes the duality of this unbelonging: not only do people think the Jews don’t belong here, “we don’t see ourselves as belonging here.” She states her strangeness in Djerba as an unchanging fact, to be simply accepted. Yet was such strangeness a given even fifty mere years ago? Despite the current



sense of the Djerban Jews that they are subject to a permanent, unalterable reality, there is evidence that other realities have been sustainable for the Djerban Jews.

However, some Djerban Jews claim to still feel profoundly at home in Djerba. When an American journalist<sup>187</sup> came to the island to witness the festival of Lag B'Omer and interviewed Djerban Jews, many attested to their comfort there. The journal's interest was to portray Djerba as an exceptional case of Jewish-Muslim coexistence, compared to strife in Israel and Palestine. It is possible that these testimonies are somewhat skewed, but I do not doubt that they were proffered with emotional honesty. The trend I have witnessed is not monolithic, and many among the older generation of Djerban Jews who have lived in Djerba all of their lives, would choose to live nowhere else. However, these testimonies all display a particular angle of the Djerban story.

A Djerban Rabbi told the journalist:

If we can make a living in Djerba," he said, "why should we move to Israel or anywhere else? Tunisia is the light of our sight. We live in comfort and peace. Perhaps we could earn more money living in France or Israel, but there is no place better than Djerba. If I can make a living at home, why move?"<sup>188</sup>

For the Rabbi, who has spent his whole life in Djerba, no other place could offer such ease and intimacy. He looks at the question on a pragmatic level as well: with both financial and psychological comfort in Djerba, it would be unreasonable to live elsewhere. The Rabbi then noted that Djerban Jews "had more in common with their fellow Tunisians than they do with the transplanted Europeans, Russians and Americans who hold political and religious power in Israel today." An elderly Djerban Jew, Hai, concurred: "I feel at home here. There are interesting places to study outside Tunisia, but maybe not to live. From my childhood I've

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<sup>187</sup> Delinda Hanley of *The Washington Report*.

<sup>188</sup> Hanley, 46-49.

lived here. The Jewish community feels secure here in Djerba. We feel the government helps us live in a secure way. We have deep roots in Djerba.”<sup>189</sup>

Trabelsi, prominent in the community echoed this sentiment, though perhaps to some degree he panders to the romanticized version of coexistence the journal sought:

Why does coexistence work in Djerba? There is no reason why we shouldn't coexist. Jews, Christians and Muslims-the only difference between us is where we pray. We've lived here from father to son. Djerba has always been stable. Our houses are surrounded by Muslim houses. We live together. We visit our friends on their religious holidays. We work together. Muslims buy meat from our butchers. When we are forbidden to work or cook on the Shabbat, we buy bread and kosher food cooked by Muslims. Our children play together. We have freedom to educate our children, teach them in Hebrew school after class, worship as we please.<sup>190</sup>

As Trabelsi notes, Jews and Muslims do live together and work together. Both communities have shared the island for generations. Muslims do buy meat from Jewish butchers. And Jews do buy pizzas and pastries (both deemed kosher) from Muslim shops in the Hara. However, he glosses over certain facts to provide a more satisfying picture of coexistence. For example, when the Jews are “forbidden to work or cook on the Shabbat,” they are also forbidden to “buy” anything. No monetary transactions of any kind can occur on the Sabbath. Moreover, my experience indicates that before the beginning of the Sabbath, every single Djerban Jewish family prepares a series of Sabbath meals kept hot in a communal oven. Accepting home-cooked food from Muslims is out of the question. Trabelsi’s descriptions may contain a general nugget of truth, but they misportray *daily interactions* between Jews and Muslims on Djerba. He is the only Djerban Jew I heard (in 2003-4) frame his relationships with Muslims as genuine friendships. The overly rosy tableau in his testimony

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<sup>189</sup> Hanley, *ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> Hanley, *ibid.*

is how he thought he could best portray Djerba to the West. He does not mention the shift in relations between the groups in the wake of thorny politics surrounding Israel.

In a parallel instance, when *Le Monde* came to Djerba in spring 2004 to do a story on the Jewish community in Tunisia, a carefully choreographed lunch meant to portray Jewish-Muslim coexistence was staged at Doly's house. A group of Muslim intellectuals from Tunis and Houmt Souq were brought to Doly's courtyard. Doly is understood to be more modern than many of the other Djerbans as she had sent her daughters to study abroad in Israel, and perhaps this is why she was chosen to host the event. She made a lavish meal and the event was photographed profusely. The lunch discussion focused on both the historical and current thriving of Jewish-Muslim relations on Djerba. I later asked Dolly if Muslims would ever be at her table in normal circumstances (she could not eat at a Muslim table because of kashrut laws, but Muslims can eat at Jewish tables). Doly replied: "Never."

Thus far I have focused how the Jews perceive themselves in a Muslim environment. In this, I have sought to gauge to what degree the Jews feel "at home" within it. I now, for a more complete picture, examine some Muslim perceptions of life in the Hara. As I have suggested, due to Ben Ali's desire to portray the continuity of Jewish-Muslim coexistence, most Muslims in Tunis, or even in Houmt Souq, echo this portrayal. A Muslim taxi driver in Houmt Souq describes the Jews as many Muslims of Tunisia might describe them: "No, there have never been any problems here. There are very good relations. Tunisia is proud of this. Muslims, Jews, Christians, we all live together. Everyone is Tunisian and proud to be." Many Tunisian Muslims carefully distinguish between the situation in Palestine as separate from that of Tunisia.

However, the Muslims of the Hara do not idealize the tension between the two groups. The Benjamias, a Muslim family, has lived in the Hara for almost ten years. I was the tenant of the Benjamias, renting their upstairs flat, and thus had ample opportunity to interact with them (to the dismay and concern of many Jews of the Hara). The Benjamias seemed to resent living amidst the Jewish population and would regularly denigrate Jewish habits. During holidays, Neziha, the mother, would first smile and say “joyous, joyous.” But then, soon after, she would add: “Uch, it is so dirty and noisy in the streets. And all they do, all the time, is just walk in circles through the streets.” When asked about Sabbath, which also involves much socializing in the streets, she rolls her eyes, and says: “Oh God, the girls are walking in circles again! And the Jews of the Hara only follow their rules because they are afraid of their Rebbe! Know that!” For Neziha, a practicing Muslim, attacking the piety of the Jews—implying that it is triggered by fear of authority—allows her to feel superior. Moreover, her home is slightly more humble than some of the surrounding Jewish homes, another source of resentment. Civil in interactions with Jews, Neziha’s general dislike is only thinly veiled.

Lubna, the Muslim hairdresser in the Hara is frequented by almost all the Jewish women and girls, particularly before festivals. They enter Lubna’s small room (part of a converted house) on the main road in the village, through the gauzy curtain which separates it from the street. They sit on the sprawl of divans for hours waiting for their turns, conversing with each other and with Lubna on the latest gossip. They treat the space almost like their homes, coming in wearing bathrobes and slippers, leaving to check the chicken on the stove, coming back, peering in to see if anyone interesting has stopped in. The exchanges between Lubna and the women seem quite intimate. She can ask how a woman’s eight children are, by name. She can rattle off every single festive occasion on which the girls will

parade in to get their hair done and eyebrows plucked. She even has a vague notion of what the holidays are. Just before Purim, she says to me, quietly: “Oh, I know this next one! This is the holiday where they eat sweets and play in the streets with those horrible firecrackers.” Once when I am at the hairdresser alone, Lubna’s assistant asks, “why don’t the girls ever wear trousers? It’s just strange!” I have not mentioned that although I wear skirts in the Hara, I wear trousers elsewhere, but she has suspected this and seeks a common reference point.

Lubna never states that she does not like or trust the women of the Hara. She does not, however, claim to have friendships among them. She interacts with them in the context of performing a service, and never exterior to it. The Jewish girls, when asked how they feel about Lubna, initially reply enthusiastically: She’s been around here forever; she straightens hair better than anyone we know.” When I ask if they consider Lubna to be a friend, they respond: “Of course not” or, “she’s goyim” or “I don’t really trust her; you never really know with goyim.” One 23-year-old woman says: “I like her well enough but I get the sense that she’s two-faced. She pretends to like us, but actually doesn’t at all. None of them do deep down.” This sense of *not being liked*, of feeling alien in the eyes of Muslims, seems to be a pervasive sentiment among the Jews.

Miryam, a practicing and veiled Muslim in her mid twenties who lives in the center of the Hara depicts the interactions between Jews and Muslims more positively:

Everything is okay. I respect them and they, me. I have a really dear [Jewish] friend, Isabel, from the Hara. I know her from school. I go to her house all the time. There are examples, see? The Hara is a very hard place. The people of the Hara are very hard. They don’t trust.

Miryam describes a relationship of mutual respect between the Jews and the Muslims of the Hara, but points to a lack of *trust* on the part of the Jewish population. Miryam deplores that

the Jews do not feel wholly comfortable and safe and respected in Djerba. She acknowledges that her friendship with Isabel is an anomaly.

Anis, a young intellectual secular Muslim, who is one of the two Muslims Doly has claimed to truly respect—and perhaps even trust—offers astute observations about the community. Anis lives in Houmt Souq, and in the past worked in a clothes store with Lavy, a Djerban Jew. He is close friends with the Kabla family, marginally observant Jews who live in Houmt Souq. Anis explains that Judaism fascinates him and that he wants to understand the faith better. He attends all the festivities for Jewish holidays at the Kabla home, yet has never been invited to a table inside the Hara itself. However, Anis has many ties to the Hara after having worked with Lavy and seeks to cultivate friendships therein. When asked if there are true friendships between Jews and Muslims in the Hara, he explains: “No, not friendships in the real sense of the word. Respect, yes. Neighborliness, yes. But the Jews do not feel comfortable enough around the Muslims, and the Muslims do not feel comfortable enough around the Jews. But before 1948, it was otherwise; *that*, they tell me, was another era.”

## CHAPTER THREE: THE WINDOW OF THE FESTIVAL

### **Introduction and Methodology**

I have examined the texture of daily interaction between Jews and Muslims in Djerba in order to analyze Jewish notions of home and belonging on the island; to arrive at a more complete and nuanced vision, I now analyze two rituals as portals onto the same complex question. Rituals function as highly concentrated enactments of the sacred-symbolic universe of a community and can offer insights about how that community situates and imagines itself in the world. According to Eliade, “man’s specific existential situation of *being in the world*” has its direct “correlate” in “the experience of the sacred.”<sup>191</sup>

I have chosen to look at two such experiences of the sacred, rituals within Purim and Lag B’Omer. These relatively minor festivals in the Jewish calendar are quite significant among Djerban Jews. The community emphasizes the particular Djerban performance of the rituals and seems to have a special (even self-defining) relationship with the festivals. My focus is Djerba’s *local* customs and the *local* emphasis the rituals receive. The Djerba-specific *effigy-burning* on Purim<sup>192</sup> and *pilgrimage* of Lag b’Omer perhaps provide prisms upon the current situation of this ancient Jewish community in the Middle East. Both contain rituals which act out the boundaries and ambivalence that are historical grappling points for Djerban Jews. The festivals’ particular manifestations in 2004-5<sup>193</sup> may help explain the community’s position in the region right now.

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<sup>191</sup> Eliade, 1969, 9.

<sup>192</sup> The effigy-burning of Haman is probably now obsolete in all other Jewish communities in the Middle East. In Israel in the 1940s, effigies of Hitler (and in the 1950s-60s, of Nasser) were occasionally burned during Lag B’Omer; the tradition is said to be perhaps borrowed from “an earlier custom of burning of the Jews archenemy on Purim” Zerubavel, 102.

<sup>193</sup> I witnessed Purim in the springs of 2004 and 2005, and Lag B’Omer in 2004

## The Festival of Purim

Purim is a window on the community's endeavors to keep itself intact, at all costs. It is a comment on the triumph of the Djerbans' *Jewishness* in what is sometimes understood by them to be an alien environment. I look at the dark allegory at Djerban Purim's core, and attempt to explain why it remains such a powerful symbol among the Djerban Jews. I assert that Haman, the biblical villain, becomes a stand-in for acting out aggression against the Muslim population, as typical feelings of impotence are reversed.

Purim has been alternately understood as the most worldly, the most expendable, the most ambivalent and the most essential holiday in the Jewish sacred calendar. It has been analyzed as a zone of boundary dissolution, a time of class and gender reversal akin to Bakhtin's medieval pre-Lent Carnavalesque.<sup>194</sup> Purim has been read as a symbolic narrative of victory of the minority,<sup>195</sup> and thereby as a boundary marker between itself and the dominant culture. It has been suggested that Purim is a kind of counter-carnival in which the barriers between Gentile and Jew are not broken down but rather reinforced.<sup>196</sup> I will adopt and modify this latter position and attempt to contextualize this darker reading within a post-1948 framework. I will examine local Djerban ritual practices and narratives surrounding them and attempt to understand their implications.

The festival's core normative components (reading the Megilah, exchanging confectionaries, the masquerade and playing games of chance) as well as its Djerban folk customs (the effigy burning of Haman) may have been maintained on the island through

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<sup>194</sup> Rubenstein, 247-277.

<sup>195</sup> Udovitch, 1984, 75.

<sup>196</sup> In one interpretation, Purim "reinforces the solidarity of the group and reaffirms the qualities that differentiate this in-group from the outside world." Fisch., 69. Horowitz, 9-54, makes a similar point.



centuries, even millennia. In offering my allegorical interpretation, I do so with a view of the holiday's historical continuity but suggest as well that a series of historical political ruptures may have given the allegory new symbolic content and clout. I contend that political change, and thus erection of new psychological boundaries, has perhaps pushed the Djerban Jews more deeply into their *Jewishness*, to the exclusion of affinity with their *Tunisian* identities. Purim is ritually expressed in 2004 as it has always been expressed. Perhaps, however, the current attitudes and feelings surrounding the festival give important insight into the shift to which I have alluded.

### **The Purim Narrative and Performance:**

*Now in the 12<sup>th</sup> month, which is the month of Adar, on the 13th day of the same, when the King's command and edict were about to be executed, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to get mastery over them, but which had changed to a day when the Jews should get mastery over their foes, the Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on such as sought their hurt. And no one could make a stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples.<sup>197</sup>*

In the historical hour of Purim, Persia reigned over 127 states from India through Ethiopia.<sup>198</sup> The spring festival recalls how Esther, the wife of the Persian king, Ahasueros, rescued the Jews from a massacre orchestrated by Haman, the evil advisor of the king. The victory feast and celebration were instituted by Mordechai, Esther's uncle. The name of the holiday comes from the Hebrew root "puru" meaning "lots," after the lots cast by Haman in order to determine the month for the community's slaughter. Esther and Mordechai are said

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<sup>197</sup> Book of Esther, 9.1-2

<sup>198</sup> Book of Esther, 9.1

to find their parallels (and perhaps inspiration) in Ishtar and Marduk, the Babylonian gods who also dealt out their peoples' fates.<sup>199</sup>

I first outline how Purim's normative components are performed in Djerba. I then analyze the implications of the effigy burning of Haman, a local Djerban custom. The center of the Purim festival (in any Jewish community) is the reading of the Megillah, or the narrative of Esther. The narrative is celebrated with "two public readings, written as if it were the royal proclamation, which form a major part of it."<sup>200</sup> The Megillah's interactive format and the adoption of costumes of the characters within it contribute to the feeling of actually reenacting the historical event. Every time the name of the dreaded Haman is spoken, children must make an angry ruckus with "groggers" (rattles), in order to blot out "the memory of Amalek," as Haman was said to be a descendant of Amalek, the ancient persecutor of the Jews. Purim is a commemoration, but also an active acting-out, in which everyone assumes the roles of (and attempts to emulate) those in the narrative. During Purim, every man strives to be like Mordechai, the Jew unapologetically proud of his faith, and like Esther, willing to risk her life for her people.

In Djerba, the identification with Mordechai is potent. The Hara enacts, through the character of Mordechai, the possibility of reversal of the order they know and of ascendance. Although no longer performed in 2004 or 2005, Udovitch notes that in 1984, one young jeweler masqueraded every year as Mordechai, and "drove around the Hara Kebira, having rented a splendid horse-carriage especially for the occasion."<sup>201</sup> The enactment pays homage to the moment in the narrative in which Mordechai, Esther's uncle, a proud and public Jew,

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<sup>199</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica 13, "Purim," 1390.

<sup>200</sup> Boyarin, 1994, 3.

<sup>201</sup> Udovitch, 76.

is honored by the King (after he warns the latter of a plot against his life.) The King asks Haman, his evil advisor, what deed would best bring honor upon a man. Haman, assuming the King wants to honor him, suggests a public and luxurious spectacle honoring that man. The gleeful reversal comes when Mordechai (Haman's enemy) is honored instead of Haman.

Moreover, like Mordechai, who became the honored counselor of the King, the Djerbans frequently point to their close relationship with the current President of Ben Ali and speak effusively of Ben Ali's warm policies towards the Jews. As Tunisia has suppressed Islamist opposition in the last several decades, it has simultaneously cultivated friendly relations with its internal minorities. The Djerban Jews are conscious of these special efforts, and of their special niche carved by those in power.

Another universal component of Purim is the "sending of portions" (generally confectionaries) to friends and giving charity: "They were to observe them [the days of Purim] as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and to the poor."<sup>202</sup> Hamantaschan, cookies shaped like Haman's three cornered hat, or his ears, are consumed. Purim thus becomes a holiday of the exchange and spread of bounty. Because of the traditional masquerade, however, theoretically the rich and the poor are meant to be indistinguishable: this is the highest form of giving in Judaism, not explicitly charity, it will not induce shame.

In Djerba, "Haman's ears" cookies are consumed with relish. In a parade of abundance, every family brings sweets to relations, friends and the poor. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, alms were also given to the Muslims,<sup>203</sup> however, this is no longer practiced. I

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<sup>202</sup> Book of Esther, 9.22.

<sup>203</sup> Dshen, personal conversation, July 2006.

brought sweets to my Muslim neighbors who had lived in the Hara for a decade and they were pleased but perplexed: “No one has ever brought us these before.”

Games of chance are also uniformly integral to the Purim festival. The Megillah states: “Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of the Jews, had plotted to destroy the Jews, and had cast *pur*—that is, the lot—with intent to crush and exterminate them. But when Esther came before the King, he commanded...”let the evil plot, which he devised against the Jews, recoil on its own head!”<sup>204</sup> During Purim, the Jews cast their own lots. By playing games of chance like dice (for money) they pay homage to the dramatic reversal of their fortune, to the precariousness of chance, and to what is understood as the invisible hand of God intervening and determining their salvation.

In Djerba, games of chance like dice and dominoes occupy the entire day. The games are couched in chance, but luck is understood as a commodity some possess. One 11-year-old girl who had been particularly lucky, and saw herself as an especially good player noted: “sometimes I win and sometimes I lose, but my hand knows how to spin, just watch!” Djerbans rarely explain success in terms of ingenuity or luck, but more commonly attribute it to God. Like the common saying of Djerban Muslims, in which all is *maktub*, or written, the Jews believe that only *Rebna yarf*, only our God knows. In this, the success of the Jews on Purim was pure Providence, scripted from the beginning.

Daniel Boyarin describes Purim as the quintessential holiday of the Diaspora: “It is the only Jewish holiday that celebrates an event which took place in Diaspora.”<sup>205</sup> Largely assimilated into Persian culture—indeed, Esther had been made queen without any question

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<sup>204</sup> Book of Esther, 9.24.

<sup>205</sup> Boyarin, 1993, 2.

of her religion<sup>206</sup>— the Jews were dramatically rendered alien with Haman’s decree. Esther’s name means “hiddenness:” she is advised by her uncle Mordechai to wield that hiddenness, to unmask herself and her people only in the crucial moment. Mordechai, by contrast, is a public Jew. He refuses to bow to Haman; he refuses to remove his mourning sackcloth when he comes to the King’s palace after the decree of annihilation of the Jews. In tandem, the two characters explain the condition of the Jews in a diaspora which was initially comfortable, but in which events go awry.

In their Purim victory, perhaps the Jews acquired an acute new awareness of themselves: estranged, triumphant, self-protective, exacting. Fisch notes that the name of God is never mentioned in the Megillah, suggesting that this is because God was particularly behind the scenes in this context; man—gaining a new awareness of his fragility and his otherness, and beginning to define himself accordingly —acted. Thereby, man redeemed his people. But in the process he became a different man.

Jeffrey Rubenstein reads Purim, somewhat facetiously, through the lens of the Carnavalesque and the dissolution of boundary.<sup>207</sup> I believe that in Djerba, rather, identity is ultimately *reinforced* in the course of the festival’s rituals. Despite any identity-blurring play which may occur during Purim, the Jews of Djerba are always deeply cogent of exactly who, according to them, is Mordechai, and who, Haman.

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<sup>206</sup> Despite parallels felt by Djerbans in the story of the Persian Jews, it must be noted that the question of assimilation was answered differently in each community. The Megillah describes a confluence of cultures in which religion seems secondary. By contrast in Djerba, the Jews and Muslims are very conscious of differences in faith.

<sup>207</sup> The egalitarian implications of getting so inebriated that one cannot distinguish between Haman (the antagonist) and Mordechai (protagonist) are noted. Rubenstein, 247-277. While the masquerade encourages abolition of socioeconomic difference, and even in some instances, acceptance in blurring gender, this applies less to shift in interaction with the Muslim population in Djerba.

Elliot Horowitz, writing on Purim in pre-modern and medieval contexts, notes the festival's "more violent anti-Christian undertones."<sup>208</sup> He collects a variety of historiographies on effigy burning of Haman, noting the resemblance of the gallows to the cross: "it was imagined they designed to insult the Christians upon the death of Jesus Christ."<sup>209</sup> Indeed, it was even suggested that "Jesus himself may have perished while doing time on the cross 'in the character of Haman'"<sup>210</sup> The concern was widespread enough for the issuing of a Theodosian decree in 408 preventing "Jewish mockery of Christianity and its symbols on Purim."<sup>211</sup> Purim effigy burning has been recorded amply from the 5-12<sup>th</sup> centuries throughout Europe and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>212</sup> Horowitz particularly notes the echoes of the Purim story felt during the rise of Nazi Germany. Indeed, "these violent rites were never entirely abandoned by the Jews, even in relatively modern times"<sup>213</sup> and Djerba is just such an instance. The fact that this ancient rite has been maintained deserves serious consideration, and may provide important insights about the community and how it perceives itself and its Others.

### **A Djerban Effigy-Burning**

The Jews of Djerba often claim that their Purim is unlike Purim elsewhere. In fact, it is difficult to know if effigy-burning is practiced elsewhere in North Africa or the Middle East at this time, however it seems unlikely. However, perhaps no other Jewish community

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<sup>208</sup> Horowitz, 9.

<sup>209</sup> Basnage, Jacques in Horowitz, 10.

<sup>210</sup> J.G. Frazer in Horowitz, 24.

<sup>211</sup> Horowitz, 36.

<sup>212</sup> According to Horowitz, *ibid*, the custom was perhaps most practiced in the Geonic period (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries). The late Middle Ages witnessed a flowering of the phenomenon.

<sup>213</sup> Horowitz, 38.

in North Africa has retained its traditions so completely intact without succumbing to secular influences. Even in transplanted Djerban communities, the practice has become obsolete. One woman from the moshav Betigadi in Israel notes: “Yes our moshav is just like the Hara Kebira. We do Purim here like we did it there.”<sup>214</sup> When asked about the effigy she says, apologetically: “We tried to maintain it for a few years after we came to Israel, but then it died out. That is real Djerba through and through. You have to go to Djerba for that.”

Purim is typically understood as a minor holiday in the Jewish calendar, in that “work on it is permitted,”<sup>215</sup> unlike on the Sabbath and the major holidays. However, the festival is accorded special weight in Djerba and most do in fact cease work. In 2003, more young men were continuing to work, describing the day as a “women and children’s holiday.” Many noted that this was a recent shift due to increased desire of the young to make money. This said, the Hara is taken over by the holiday, its allies full of women carrying platters of sweets and children playing games of chance. Neighborhood Muslim shopkeepers selling toys and Kosher candy line the streets.

I now analyze the festival’s particularities in Djerba. I compare my observations with those of Abraham Udovitch who collected his fieldwork in the late seventies/ early eighties. My notes confirm many of his, but also diverge, suggesting perhaps subtle shifts which have occurred not in the content of the holiday, but in the meaning behind that content. Udovitch has collected and translated a series of couplets sung on Purim on the way to the burning of the Haman effigy:

*“Haman who is buried/ May he be really dead  
Haman who is choked/ May he be scorched*

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<sup>214</sup> Betigadi, Israel, July 2005.

<sup>215</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica 13, 1392.

*Haman who, is sad/ May his foot be under clay.  
Haman, who is scorched/ May his foot be in the market.*<sup>216</sup>

The couplets are reserved for anyone perceived as an “enemy,” who is encountered en route. Because of the proceeding’s early hour, the boys do not necessarily encounter any Muslims on their way. The song reveals an anxiety: even though Haman has been buried, is he actually dead? Can he take on other manifestations? Is he still a threat? It is not sufficient to hang Haman on the gallows as occurs in the actual narrative; his body must be completely obliterated. Perhaps the most pertinent part of the song to our discussion is the verbal shift between the hypothetical and the real. For example, line two, “May he be scorched” is capped by the shift in line four: “Haman, who is scorched.” In this, an act of imagination is transformed into an act of will. The victory is not only anxiously played out; it is lived.

Describing the morning of the ceremony, Udovitch notes: “the effigies of Haman, his wife and ten children are placed in bags filled with paper and wood, and children set fire to them, beat them with fronds and sing of their destruction.”<sup>217</sup> I did not witness the effigy burning the first time I was in Djerba (2004), as no one in the Hara explained when and how the event would be taking place. As girls and women are not permitted to attend, they only answered my questions vaguely. However, I did see the burning the subsequent year when several of the women of the community acquiesced and told me the children would lead me there because it was “such a special Djerban tradition.”

I witnessed a slightly different variation on the event described by Udovitch. The effigy-burning was described in vague terms and no one could pin down when it would occur. Most said that it typically began early in the morning, but it was unpredictable; “at some

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<sup>216</sup> Udovitch, 76.

<sup>217</sup> *ibid.*



hour, the boys will just start running!” I was told by numerous people that no one ever knew when the event would begin. It was repeatedly described almost as a kind of spontaneous conflagration, as if the appropriate hour would be collectively, viscerally intuited by its participants. Indeed, I arrived at 5:30, and it did not begin until 8:45.

The boys and a supervising group of men headed to the courtyard of the local synagogue where studies were held. Haman’s stuffed body was already prepared: he wore a dirty pair of children’s trousers and a flannel shirt and did not have a head. Haman was nailed to a gallows which structurally resembled a very large crucifix. Attached to its perpendicular arms were Haman’s wife and ten children. They were represented by computer print-outs. The only icon available to represent a female was that of a princess, and thus Haman’s wife was a princess. This initially confused me, and I wondered if somehow Queen Esther was being burned. The ten children were represented by various computer print-outs (googly-eyed faces, clowns, aliens, etc).

As the men anchored Haman’s body to the wooden structure, the boys threw startlingly loud firecrackers in a constant stream. The men had already prepared a pit in the courtyard and at this point filled it with leaves and twigs and newspaper. They then jugged the structure into the pit. The ambience was light-hearted and quite boisterous. The children’s faces were smeared with chocolate from the morning’s exchange of sweets. They ran around the pit in excitable circles.

The men doused the entire structure with lighter fluid, and flames began to rise. The children stepped too close to the fire, receiving reprimands from the men. Haman’s wife and children burned much more readily as they were made of paper. At one point, several of the boys became impatient waiting for Haman to be consumed by flames—the culmination of

the entire event. They came dangerously close to the fire, continuously swatting the effigy with a lit palm frond. The men watched and did not reprimand once, even though the children were closer to the fire than they had been before. The moment was crucial; the event was incomplete until Haman was destroyed.

The event seems to be understood as a playful jaunt for the children and teenage boys (young girls can attend, but pubescent girls and women are not permitted: I was allowed to watch as I was a visitor). Before and after the event, women and girls of all ages were eager to share their perceptions and to hear my reactions: “Watch the little boys get Haman! They are unstoppable!”; “Did they get Haman good this time?”; “Did you see Haman? Wasn’t it fun?!” In each instance, I was proudly asked if I had seen Haman, and if I had had fun. No one suggested that the event was an unnerving spectacle. The emphasis of course was always on “getting” the villain, and coming out on top. Upon showing my photographs of the conflagration to one woman she said: “It looks like Osama Ben Laden hit the Hara! Scary!”

Although generally couched in playful fun, during the pinnacle of its performance, one can observe an almost mystical fervor of its participants. The romp around the fire is frenetic. Firecrackers are pelted aggressively at the ground (one even exploded at my ankles, which seemed a deliberate gesture on the part of several boys who were hostile to the presence of an observing woman). The movement and clamor as Haman is burned rises to a fevered pitch. Meanwhile, although the Muslims of the Hara are not permitted into the courtyard to observe the spectacle, many reacted uncomfortably to the general atmosphere of the festival. A few when asked what they thought of Purim cringed, gesturing vaguely to the air around them, pockmarked by the constant rupture of small explosive devices. One woman lamented: “Uch, why wont they stop already; can’t anyone get some peace around here?”

Although the Muslim population had never witnessed the effigy-burning, they seemed to sense the aggressive mood in the air. After the effigy burning, the children entered the streets with their firecrackers. The firecrackers were consistently thrown too close to the Muslim shops. A band of Muslim children from the Hara typically congregate at the roundabout at the entrance to the village; I noted the Jewish children aiming their firecrackers in the general direction of the Muslim children. It was not uncommon to see children playing out the aggression of their parents (insulting or avoiding children from the other group) on normal days of the week, however this mood was particularly pronounced on Purim. The celebration was not only for survival and continuance; it was also for vengeance. The identification between Haman as foe and the Muslims as foe was not explicitly drawn during the festival. However, a later narrative confirmed my suspicions.

### **Djerban Modifications of the Megilah**

One prescient gloss of the Megilah (the Purim narrative) was relayed to me by a group of three Djerban women in the moshav of Betigadi in Southern Israel. All in their late sixties and early seventies, they had all emigrated to Israel as young wives within the decade after 1948. I did not hear such glosses in Djerba proper, but would not be surprised if they still circulated. The narratives reveal Djerban preoccupations with purity and with divine providence. Although my general contention is and has been that there was a greater psychological comfort between Jews and Muslims in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which then diminished, this story illustrates certain boundaries and conceptions which, I believe, have always been present for Djerban Jews. Even when there was greater movement between the monoform community into the polyform society—in the form of warmer shared cultural

perceptions, shared blessings and more diverse economic exchange—intermarriage would still be of the greatest taboo. It is this taboo which has enabled the Djerban community to remain so very intact.

The women all concurred that their most powerful memories of Purim had occurred in their childhoods in Djerba. They told me the story of Esther collectively, revising and amending each other's contributions. Three elements deviated from the typical Megilah story, the implications of which I will now examine.

In the Megilah, Esther is introduced quite simply as a maiden “shapely and beautiful.”<sup>218</sup> The women of the moshav insisted that Queen Esther was not initially beautiful—rather she was “quite plain, even ugly!” They explained: “Esther was not beautiful at first! God made her beautiful so she could save us! Otherwise how could she save us?” Esther's beauty is understood as a means of redemption planted in the midst of catastrophe, and thus the most deliberate of godly choices even though God's name is never mentioned in the story. For the Djerbans, salvation was preordained. Indeed their messianism would accept no other outcome.

Secondly, throughout their narration, the women referred to all the Persians in the Megillah—The King, Haman, the people of Shushan—as Arabs. This indicates, perhaps, that the identification with the story is less subconscious and allegorical than, in fact, literal. The story was a three dimensional and participatory entity for these women. They fasted for Esther and understood Esther as a tool of God—as they each, more subtly were tools of God, simply by being observant Jews. Their men could be Mordechai, parading around the Hara Kebira, publicly proud of their Judaism. The Persians in the Esther story, and especially

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<sup>218</sup> Book of Esther, 2,7.

Haman, were understood explicitly as Arabs. Their obliteration was imperative to the proper enactment of Purim. Eliot Horowitz has noted the possibility for ritually acting out aggression through the Purim festival; this reading of Persians as Arabs, and the ensuing burning of the Persians, could hardly be understood otherwise.

Perhaps the most dramatic departure from the Megilah story was the Djerban womens' explanation of Esther's marriage to the Persian (Arab) King, Ahaseurus. In the Megilah it is written: "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."<sup>219</sup> The Djerban women, unable to tolerate the notion that Esther, (a Jew) might marry and lie with Ahasueros, a Persian (Arab) had found an escape clause. They explained: "Esther did not marry Ahasueros! It was a fake wedding, because he was an Arab—a goy!—and a Jewish woman could never marry an Arab. So an Arab woman was found to lie with Ahasueros!" When I asked what happened to Esther once the Jews were saved, the women replied, without missing a beat, that Esther surely properly married a Jewish man. Maybe even a Rabbi."

The Djerban taboo against intermarriage was so ingrained that popular imagination had salvaged the Megilah's disregard of the issue. The women were all familiar with the actual Megilah: women too are enjoined to hear and participate in the story during Purim. In Djerba, they congregated in the women's section of the synagogue on the eve of Purim to hear the story. When the men went to the shul for a second time the subsequent day, they came home and repeated the story yet again to their wives. Were the women conflating the text with a popular story? Was the distinction clear in their minds? "Is what you have

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<sup>219</sup> Book of Esther, 2,17.

described to me what is written in the Megillah?” I asked the women. “This is what happened,” they replied.

The essential question which marks Purim—the threat of disappearance, whether through assimilation or annihilation, is at the crux of the Djerban Jewish identity. Remaining a *monoform* community right now is becoming increasingly challenging for the Jews, and it is only through the scrupulous maintenance of boundaries that they can retain their own coherence and unity. There is no time in Djerban Jewish history in which either women or food could be exchanged with the Muslim community. However, broader psychological boundaries are another question entirely. How have the Djerban Jews *perceived* the polyform community which has always surrounded them? How do they now perceive them?

The Purim festival allows a glimpse into the boundaries between the two groups, and a moment in which the *Jewish* facet of the Djerban Jewish identity is enacted perhaps at the expense of the Djerban facet. In burning the effigy of Haman, the Jews express that their only way to feel safe, to *belong*, is to overcome and indeed destroy that element which threatens them. This, as a broader cosmology, reveals a core fear that there is no room for reconciliation with that Other. This fear, at bottom, is that letting in and trusting the other, relinquishing one’s boundaries, is akin to disappearing. The local Djerban manifestations of Purim display the most protective, insular and distrustful mechanisms of the community, which enable its own perpetuation, but at a cost.

### **The Festival of Lag B’Omer:**

Like in the case of Purim, Lag B’Omer’s local manifestations provide a window upon the community’s preoccupations with boundary, and questions of home, but offer a different

resolution to the problem. I analyzed Purim as a ritual moment in which psychological boundaries between the Jews and Muslims became more ossified. Haman is burned in enclosure: triumphant victory over the enemy is enacted behind closed doors. The mood provoked by that act then permeates through the streets, and is acted out again in smaller bursts of aggression through the explosion of firecrackers near Muslim shops.

However, in Lag B'Omer, the Jewish community showcases itself *with pride* to the surrounding Muslim community. By articulating itself undefensively, I do not suggest that the Jewish community dissolves its boundaries; rather it imagines a vision of maintaining certain boundaries while still interacting more positively and fluidly with the Muslim community. Ultimately Lag B'Omer is an opportunity for the Jews to celebrate their distinctiveness, and the duality of their Jewish and Tunisian identities.

The Djerban version of Lag B'Omer entails a pilgrimage to a *local* saint in addition to commemorating Shimon Bar Yohai, ("Rebbe Shimon"), understood to be the writer of the Zohar. As both North African Jews and Muslims venerate holy men,<sup>220</sup> the rite may furnish mutual identification between the groups. Also, because Rebbe Shimon wrote the Zohar during the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, and the Djerban Jews associate the holy figure with their own messianic longings, the holiday is evocative on deeply Jewish levels. During the festivities, the Djerban Jews *both firmly situate themselves in Djerba and celebrate their connection to Israel*. In this, perhaps they resolve the paradox of their identities by claiming two homes. I read this ritual in 2003 as a suspension, an acting-out of what has been and could be possible for the Jews of Djerba.

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<sup>220</sup> There are a number of documented cases in which Jews and Muslims of North Africa venerate the *same* holy men. Ben Ami, 1993, 14.

## The Lag B'Omer Narrative and Performance

Lag B'Omer serves as a cessation in a period of mourning. In between the second night of Passover until the day before Shavuot (a seven week period), the *omer*, a unit of measurement designating the barley offered to the Temple were counted, to mark the days before the offering. This counting process emphasized the link between Passover (which commemorates the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt) and Shavu'ot (which commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Jews). The reminder was that escape from oppressors and ensuing redemption could not be complete until the Jews possessed the Torah, their Holy Book. This seven week period is also one of mourning for a plague which occurred during the lifetime of Rabbi Akiva: no weddings or parties can occur, hair may not be cut. However, on Lag B'Omer, the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of counting the omer, the mourning prescriptions are lifted: celebrations commemorating Rebbe Shimon ensue.<sup>221</sup>

Bar Yohai, a student of Rabbi Akiva, was a sage who lived during the Roman conquest of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) When the Romans outlawed the Torah, he spoke out and a death sentence was pronounced against him. Bar Yohai went into hiding for twelve years with his son in a cave (miraculously supplied with a river and carob tree), and according to the story, composed the Zohar, unlocking the deepest mystical secrets of the Torah. Although the Djerban Jews understand Shimon Bar Yohai to be the Zohar's writer, its authorship is documented to Moses de Leon in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain, who collected Bar Yohai's commentaries. It is the Djerban myth, however, which informs their understanding of the mystical book and its origins, which is most pertinent here.

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<sup>221</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica 10, 1356-58.



According to Kabbalistic tradition, Bar Yohai died on Lag B’Omer, and miraculously, the sun would not set until he passed on. The tradition of lighting candles and bonfires here originates. Rabbi Abba, sent to transcribe Bar Yohai’s words notes the powerful light emanating from the body of the sage: “The entire day, the house was filled with fire, and nobody could get close to the wall of fire and light. At the end of the day, the fire subsided and I was able to look at the face of Rabbi Shimon. He was dead, wrapped in his Tallis (prayer shawl), lying on his right side—and smiling.”<sup>222</sup> The parallels between this description and those of Djerba’s local saint are quite astonishing. I explore their possible implications imminently.

Pilgrimage and veneration of holy men have been acknowledged as important components of religiosity among North African Jews. These practices have been read as both assimilation of a local Muslim practice and as linked to the Kabbalah.<sup>223</sup> Certainly, the influence of popular Sufism cannot be underestimated. In North Africa, the saint cult has probably been the most widespread expression of Islam from the late middle ages through the early modern period<sup>224</sup> and has become a “universal aspect of Islamic expression.”<sup>225</sup> Absorption of this ethos has inflected Judaism in the region. Indeed, for both Jews and Muslims in North Africa, saints—called *zaadiks* in the case of the Jews—can perform “miracles associated with the curing of illness and salvation of individuals of the entire

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<sup>222</sup> Simmons. Online posting at [www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com). Also, “the theme of fire and light was explained as symbolizing the light emanating from the Rabbi upon his death.” Zerubavel, 98.

<sup>223</sup> Valensi, 2002, 886-927.

<sup>224</sup> Ronald Nettle, personal conversation.

<sup>225</sup> Trimingham, 219. However, popular mysticism was often challenged by more legalistic sects. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Wahabi revival movement (and subsequent Salafistic reform movements) sought to purge Islam of superstition and heresy. Particularly antagonistic to Sufi practices, Wahabis destroyed saints’ tombs in their conquered territories. (105-7).

community.”<sup>226</sup> Ben Ami mentions folk medicine practices linked to the shrine of a zaadik: “people leave bottles of olive oil, jewels, coins, etc in the tomb overnight to receive the blessing of the zaadik. Barren women leave a belt on the tomb. Streamers and ribbons are hung on branches...candles and glasses [are sold] in the zaadik’s name.”<sup>227</sup> Such practices are equally linked to Muslim saint visitation. The pilgrimage at the center of the festivities in Lag B’Omer rings familiar with both groups.

Lucette Valensi<sup>228</sup> points to the localization of mysticism in the case of Djerba: “religion was expressed with reference to a common tradition, but in vernacular form. For example, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai (and Meier Ba’al Ha Nes, another 2<sup>nd</sup> century Rabbi of Palestine also associated with mysticism), were shared as reference points by the larger Jewish community. However, “their cult in North Africa was also associated with a third figure, a local male or female saint.”<sup>229</sup> The commemoration of the death of these two mystical rabbis coincided with celebration of this local saint.

In Djerba, this local saint is a young girl, the Ghriba, the “strange” or “marvelous” one, and Djerba’s most important synagogue—also called the Ghriba—was constructed in her name. In another legend, the island itself was called Ghriba by the Jews upon their arrival in 586 B.C. after the fall of the Temple. The Ghriba synagogue was renovated in the 1860s; however, the date of its original construction is not precisely known. There are known to be at least six synagogues in North Africa with this same name.<sup>230</sup> It is the only synagogue in the Hara Sgheira which can hold the Torah scrolls, and it is the place where all new married

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<sup>226</sup> Ben Ami, 2003, 200.

<sup>227</sup> Ben Ami, *ibid*, 202.

<sup>228</sup> Valensi, 2002, 897.

<sup>229</sup> Valensi, *ibid*, 897.

<sup>230</sup> Udovitch, 124.

couples come to be blessed and photographed. It is the single synagogue visited by tourists (the other synagogues in the Haras are small and inconspicuous prayer corners.) As the site of the most important pilgrimage in Djerba, it has become a symbolic center both within the Haras and in emigrant communities.

According to local legend, the site where the Ghriba synagogue now stands was once a deserted stretch of land untouched by the inhabitants of the Hara Sgheira. A girl mysteriously arrived on the island one day and constructed a hut of branches in that place. Some claim she had an aura of purity about her, and out of respect, none approached her. Others note the Jews were afraid of her, not comprehending her presence on the island, and did not approach. One night, flames engulfed her hut. Afraid she was performing some kind of magic, the Jews did not come to the girl's aid. The next morning, the hut was reduced to ashes, but her body and even the features of her face were intact.<sup>231</sup> This description is eerily similar to that of the body of Shimon Bar Yohai. Both figures seem to be identified with mysticism in Djerba. I later read the Ghriba as performing a mystical function for the Jews of Djerba, as a kind of mediating figure between the people and God, elaborating upon a thesis of Udovitch.

### **A Djerban Pilgrimage :**

Like Purim, Lag B'Omer creates a carnival of sorts. But whereas in the former, the idiom was disguise, the latter embraces revealing—perhaps even displaying—the community's more intimate truths. I now outline the pilgrimage and the procession, which accompany Lag B'Omer in Djerba. I then examine the festivities I witnessed in 2004,

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<sup>231</sup> Udovitch, 124.

ultimately reading the holiday as a suspension of some of the typical norms which governed the Jews and Muslims of the Hara at that time. However, the mood of the Hara could not, of course, be completely reversed: certain pervasive realities continued to impinge even upon the carnival.

On the first day of the holiday, (the 14<sup>th</sup> of Iyar on the Jewish calendar) the Jews of the Hara Kebira go to the Ghriba synagogue in Hara Sgheira to light a commemorative candle for Rebbe Shimon and Rebbe Meier. The next day, visitors do the same. Under the ark where the holy Torah scrolls are kept is a “niche hollowed out...marking the place where the body of the mysterious girl was found.”<sup>232</sup> The women of the community place candles and uncooked eggs in this niche. Each egg is inscribed with the name of a girl of marriageable age, or of a married girl, who has not yet given birth. The eggs are left overnight. Upon their hardening, each appointed girl must eat the egg to fulfill the wish.<sup>233</sup> This niche is the shrine Ben Ami describes—the gifts left therein are gifts of supplication to the Ghriba. The pilgrims then leave the synagogue and brandy and dried fruit are bestowed upon the Rabbis who chant a hymn to Rebbe Shimon. The men rejoice in Bar Yohai’s name all night long, in a vigil with the Zohar.

In the subsequent few days, a joyous atmosphere permeates the courtyard adjacent to the Ghriba synagogue.<sup>234</sup> A local orchestra plays Jewish folksongs, candles are lit in the synagogue, reunions of families and friends erupt in the courtyard and in the surrounding street. Wares are hawked loudly and kebabs, ice cream, egg crepes and beer are consumed.

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<sup>232</sup> Valensi, 2002, 899.

<sup>233</sup> Udovitch, 126.

<sup>234</sup> Originally a fondog housing pilgrims and livestock, the courtyard now hosts the festivities.

The climax of the celebration occurs around the 17<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, on the Jewish calendar (the second or third day of festivities), with the procession of the *menara*. The *menara* is a large candelabra, shaped like a hexagonal pyramid, mounted on wheels. According to Udovitch, it has five ascending levels which:

represent the [D]jerban view of the hierarchy of beings. At the base are the Jewish people made up of the twelve tribes of Israel; then come the various famous rabbis of Tunisia whose names mingle at the third level with those of important biblical personages, such as Abraham, Isaac, Rachel and Leah. At the top of the third level an inscription...reads: 'This candelabrum is in honor of Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, may their merits assure us of protection.' Over this, the name of God, *Shaddai*, is inscribed in a star of David ...then, finally, the tablets of the Law, in silver, crown the whole construction.<sup>235</sup>

The *menara* is cloaked in wisps of silk and chiffon, sold to the crowd to adorn the structure. Women gather around the *menara*, sprinkling it with rosewater each time a sale is made. The local orchestra plays with gusto and the crowd is rapt.

The procession, the culmination of the several days of festivities, begins in the main courtyard and crosses through the whole of the Hara Sgheira, stopping at every small prayer house, arriving back at the Ghriba synagogue. Although only one kilometer is traversed, the procession takes hours, due to the constant stops. During the procession, blessings are auctioned away every few paces. The event is boisterous and participatory.

In May 2004, the festival created a somewhat permeable mingling space between Djerbans, returning Djerbans, tourists and Muslims. Men, women and children moved through a fairly small shared space: the interior of the courtyard and the single street between courtyard and synagogue. First, it must be noted that shared space for men and women is an absolute anomaly for the Djerban Jews. During other festive times in Djerba, like weddings,

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<sup>235</sup> Udovitch, 127.

there is a gate between the men and women's areas. The men dance and consume alcoholic beverages; the women sit fairly demurely, chatting and passing plates of sunflower seeds. I was admonished for tapping my hands on my chair: "Girls don't dance while men are around." At the pilgrimage however, people mill around one space, moving about lightly and comfortably. European tourists dance. Djerban men dance. Djerban women sway easily in their chairs. Muslims clap.

Traki Cohen who had emigrated to Israel in the early fifties recounted returning to the Ghriba eight years ago: "There was a young Muslim woman, beautiful, cute. She sat down next to us. I said to her: 'I am Djerban.' She said, 'I must tell you the truth: I am not Jewish. But the Jews, I really like them.'"<sup>236</sup> Traki had earlier expressed ambivalence about Djerba: "What is there left in Djerba? Just Arabs and the Ghriba." But upon recounting this specific anecdote, she noted: "There are some good Muslims."

One large Muslim family from Bizerte, a city in the North of Tunisia, visited the Ghriba for the first time. They had come on a trip to Djerba without realizing their vacation would coincide with the Jewish festival, of which they had never heard. The mother and daughter were veiled. They walked around the pulpit where the Rabbi stands in the synagogue, admiring the elaborate woodwork. The father explained in a quiet voice to his son, "this is where the Jews pray. Isn't it beautiful?" The mother and daughters walked around in circles examining the synagogue. I approached them and asked if I could answer any of their questions about the community, explaining that I was a Jewish American who was living in Djerba briefly. They welcomed my approach and asked a series of questions

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<sup>236</sup> Traki Cohen, Moshav Tlamim, Israel, July 2005.

about the pilgrimage and the reason for celebration. They then invited me to stay with them in their home the next time I was in the North.

The Benjimias, a Muslim family who has lived in the area for more than a decade, was reluctant to attend the pilgrimage: “Why should we come, no one has invited us.” Their 11-year-old daughter, Rim, clamored to attend, and her mother sharply reproached her. Her older teenager brothers had been before without her. Upon my invitation, she said: “I’ll think about it. I know it is festive, but I don’t know if I want to make the effort. It is so noisy and crowded.” Although I wanted to volunteer to take the daughter, I feared alienating the Jews of the Hara, so just expressed my hope that they would all come along. In the late afternoon, one of the two brothers came on his motorcycle, and seemed to be enjoying himself a good deal, staying for several hours. Rim’s mother elected to not attend, and did not facilitate her daughter’s attendance.

During the procession itself, I witnessed many Muslims who had not themselves attended the festivities peer out of shops or from doorsteps of their homes to watch. Some of the children even joined in. There was also a string of reporters from abroad who had come to write on the festivities. They had heard that an American student had been living in the community, and were eager to get my perspective. They commented effusively on the example of Jewish-Muslim coexistence Djerba provided in a time such as now. I agreed, though noted that it was “not quite as good as it looked,” and perhaps they should spend a bit more time in the Hara to get a more rounded perspective on Jewish-Muslim relations. Most only stayed for the duration of the pilgrimage and then proceeded to write articles perhaps romanticizing the relationship between the two groups. The joyously inclusive atmosphere of the Ghriba obscured some of the harder realities of day-to-day coexistence.

After the procession, the Tunisian minister of Tourism, Abderrahim Zouari made a speech in the packed interior of the Ghriba synagogue to a mixed audience, acknowledging the important role the Tunisian Jews had played “in the construction of [Tunisia’s] culture and its civilization.”<sup>237</sup> He continued, approximately: “We are proud to have the Jews in Djerba. May the Jews and the Muslims of Djerba always live happily side by side. Let this be an example for the rest of the world.” Each statement he made was punctuated by cheers—of tourists, of Jews, and of Muslims.

Perhaps Lag B’Omer is the one festival in which the Muslims can *participate*. Both the mood of the holiday and the official governmental platform point to a specific vision for coexistence for the Jews and Muslims of Djerba. Although the Muslims do not know the details of the symbolic structure of the menara which is paraded through the joint quarters, they seem to sense that something significant is being displayed. For the Jews, ferrying the lavish menarah—a source of immense pride and historic continuity, and a symbol for the hierarchy which structures their very existence—through the mixed Jewish Muslim quarter, seems to be a potent and ambivalent moment. Particularly in Hara Sgheira, where the Jewish population has waned to only a handful of families, it is understood that this procession is now moving through predominantly *Muslim* space. These homes, vacated during waves of emigration to Israel and France, were previously occupied by Jews. Yet in 2004, the Jews of Djerba must contend with a changed reality: their neighbors are now Muslim.

Lag B’Omer contrasts starkly with the typical observance of Jewish holidays, during which the community becomes particularly impermeable to outsiders. Sacred space is usually cautiously protected and doors firmly closed. During the Sabbath, meticulous restrictions are

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<sup>237</sup> Alfassa, online posting.



observed: cars are not driven, lights not turned off or on, girls do not even brush their hair. The entrance of a Muslim on a motorbike or car reverberates in waves of discomfort through the community. During the Sabbath, the Jews do not leave the confines of the eruv, the demarcating line which permits the carrying of objects during the Sabbath. The eruv circumscribes a zone of exemption where, for example, strollers can be pushed and platters of food can be carried. Shlomo Deshen, after a stint of fieldwork in Djerba in 1992 notes: “The eruv of the Hara is remarkable. It was designed so as to exclude the central area of town where the shops were located. The eruv snaked around the market area, excluding it, and including only the Jewish residential area. The Djerban eruv had the effect of enclosing the community....and also discouraged the people of the community from wandering into the Muslim village center so close to them.”<sup>238</sup> The eruv is constituted by a metal wire, which stretches continuously between the rooftops of the Hara. On the ground in parallel, there are molded reliefs at the base of the walls of the homes at the village’s edge “to simulate town gates.”<sup>239</sup> As the Jews do not venture beyond the eruv during the Sabbath, there seems to be an equal wish that others note that invisible line, and do not venture in. In Lag B’Omer, that taut line, physical and psychological, which separates Jew from Muslim, briefly ceases to exert its full force.

I have established how the festival is a celebration of the Jews locating themselves deeply in Djerba, creating a space to showcase their own traditions, and to—briefly—relinquish some of the community’s typical boundaries. It is equally a celebration of the particular *Jewishness* of the community and its messianic, and indeed, mystical vision. I examine this aspect of Djerban Jewish identity through a brief study of the symbols and

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<sup>238</sup> Deshen, 1997, 104.

<sup>239</sup> Udovitch, 32.

songs, which form such an integral part of the Lag B’Omer festival. Without desiring to enter into the esoteric complexities of the Zohar and larger Kabbalah, I will examine Udovitch’s mystical reading of the festival, and add my own small twist.

In interpreting the ritual through Zoharic symbolism, Udovitch reads the pilgrimage as a “wedding feast.”

One of the major themes of Zoharic mysticism is that of the mystical marriage of the community with its Lord, through which the hidden meaning of the Divine Word is revealed in its infinite fullness. In Zoharic symbolism, the community represents the feminine principle, and God the masculine principle. In [D]jerba, to lead the menarah clad in bride’s finery in a procession is, in the end, to lead the community to its Lord.<sup>240</sup>

As the community seeks its Lord, I believe there is a symbolic intermediary, a kind of helpmate. I will read the mythical saint-figure of the Ghriba as that helpmate, identifying her symbolically with the Shekhina, a crucial figure in the Zohar. This symbolic investigation will allow me to further explore Djerban Jewish notions of exile and homeland, and how they are particularly manifested in the festival of Lag B’Omer.

The Kabbalistic conception of the Shekhina diverges radically from the conventional Rabbinic conception.<sup>241</sup> In Rabbinic thought, the Shekhina “literally the indwelling, namely of God in the world—is taken to mean simply God himself in his omnipresence and activity in the world and especially in Israel.”<sup>242</sup> God and the Shekhina are, ultimately, indistinguishable. However, from the earliest Kabbalistic thought, the Shekhina becomes “a quasi independent feminine element within Him.”<sup>243</sup> The Shekhina is also symbolically identified with the Jewish community, and with the soul. According to Waite, in mystical

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<sup>240</sup> Udovitch, 131.

<sup>241</sup> Lodahl, 1992.

<sup>242</sup> Scholem, 1969,105.

<sup>243</sup> *ibid.*

thought, “it is She who enables the Name of God to be expressed on Earth, or God to be realized in the heart.”<sup>244</sup>

The story of the Shekhina in the Zohar, and the Djerban myth of the Ghriba, bear some striking parallels which deserve exploration. My readings, in the realm of the symbolic-poetic, ask if the figures may on any level be associatively bound in the mind of the Djerban Jew, and why this may be important. Although these readings are not verifiable, both my fieldwork and the historical theoretical material I have consulted suggest that these associations do exist. Scholem notes the symbolic continuity between mystical symbols and cumulative historical experience of the Jewish people.<sup>245</sup> Understanding these two figures in tandem enriches the imagery of exile and redemption surrounding each, and I believe ultimately forms a symbolic whole. Ultimately this composite human<sup>246</sup>/deity figure explains much about Djerban Jewish connection to both Djerba and to Israel, and thus the complexity of Djerban Jewish notions of home.

First, both Shekhina and Ghriba are protective forces, shielding the people from harm. Both are initially betrayed by the community, but do not abandon it. In the instance of the Shekhina, her exile from God “is generally imputed to the destructive action and magical influence of sin [on the part of humanity].”<sup>247</sup> She is betrayed by the community when they sin, but retains her faith in the Jews, following them into exile: “Wherever they [Israel] went into exile, the Shekhina went with them.”<sup>248</sup> In the case of the Ghriba, the community does

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<sup>244</sup> Waite, 346.

<sup>245</sup> Scholem, 1969, 2.

<sup>246</sup> Although the Ghriba becomes a saint, it is never forgotten that her original manifestation was a young girl. Likewise, the Shekhina is understood to have “risen from the dust.” (Scholem, 1971, 100) Although she is godly, she is also understood in human terms.

<sup>247</sup> Scholem, 1969, 108.

<sup>248</sup> Megilah 29a in Lodahl, 81.

not trust her, and allows her hut to burn, not understanding that she is pure and virtuous. After this betrayal, the Jews recognize their error, and make the site of her death the sanctified place upon which they erect their synagogue. The Ghriba seems then to forgive, yielding into this new role and becoming a protective force for the community as their saint.

Second, both Shekhina and Ghriba also serve as mediators. The Shekhina is imagistically portrayed as the *trunk* of the community<sup>249</sup>—thus the mediating force between the community and God. In this, she was “never separate from man as long as he observed the commandments.”<sup>250</sup> Moreover, “it is prayer which connects the community to the Shekhina, and thereby to the Holy One.”<sup>251</sup> Connection to, and protection by the Shekhina is constituted by observance of the law, and continuous prayer.<sup>252</sup> The Shekhina is ultimately understood “[to be] either the House of prayer or else abides therein.”<sup>253</sup> The Ghriba assumes the same mediating function between the people and God. Like the Shekhina, she helps to enable the community’s expression of its religiosity. In fact, she can be understood as *the body* of the synagogue *itself*; the illustrious house of prayer is constructed over her remains.

In this symbolic constellation, the Shekhina and Ghriba are both helpmates, she who brings the community closer to God—and in Djerba, this means closer to a messianic age. Both figures are thus intimately connected to Djerban notions of Israel. She can be

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<sup>249</sup> Waite, 347.

<sup>250</sup> Waite, 359.

<sup>251</sup> Waite, 361.

<sup>252</sup> R. Nathan Neta’ Hanover, *Sha’arei Tzion*, Prague 1662 in Idel, 317, discusses a kabbalistic ritual (which originated in Safed) in which, through prayer, “you should make your body a chariot for the Shekhina.” Thus through the act of prayer, one assists the Shekhina in reaching God. In Lurianic Kabbala, a similar image to the same end is emphasized: the act of prayer (described as “lifting up the sparks” of ones’ own soul) in turn uplift the Shekhina: “Everything serves man to concentrate his mind and to lift up the sparks of his own soul which are, at the same time, the sparks of the Shekhina.” Scholem, 1971, 189.

<sup>253</sup> Waite, 370.

understood as the composite figure who helps to rectify exile; simultaneously, however, she embodies *exile itself*. I examine now this last proposition more closely: she “embodies exile itself.” The Ghriba/Shekhina is also perhaps a stand-in for *the entire community*: she is the stranger in an unknown land. Do the Djerban Jews, on some level perceive themselves as this stranger, this private, virtuous young girl who feels to be surrounded by an unwelcoming and indifferent majority? Have they too constructed their huts upon an isolated patch of land, and then constructed gates? Presupposing the hostility of the exterior, does it thereby become hostile? Likewise, the Djerban Jewish community both *burns* and *saves* itself through its own boundaries and gates. Without them, they would not be able to keep their traditional religious community intact. Perhaps like other Jewish communities in North Africa, they would succumb to assimilation. Yet *with* these gates, do the Djerban Jews alienate themselves from a part of their own identity? Do they forget their own inevitable Djerbanness?

To return to the symbolic paradigm again, both Ghriba and Shekhina emerge to help mediate the *longing* of the community for an end to exile and the beginning of an age of redemption. Indeed, each figure came into existence in parallel: just as Rebbe Shimon’s body remained intact despite the flames of revelation, so too did the Ghriba’s. The Shekhina, part of Yohai’s grand vision, was “drawn into this world by the fire which burns in the hearts of the patriarchs.”<sup>254</sup> Both the mediating roles of the Ghriba and the Shekhina, like that of Bar Yohai, became activated by the flames.

Moreover, each figure, when she is *made complete*, signals the beginning of redemption. And it is the *community* who assists in this act of completion. The Shekhina is

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<sup>254</sup> Waite, 357.

often described as a field of Holy apple trees, “a field” to be “tilled,”<sup>255</sup> whereas one typical epithet for the Ghriba is a “field of dreams.”<sup>256</sup> To fertilize each mystical or mythical figure, *through the act of prayer*, is to seek fulfillment and wholeness. Offering the Ghriba eggs inscribed with wishes for marriage and fertility is asking for perpetuation of the community. In the Zoharic vision, that perpetuation aims to usher in an era of messianic redemption. For the Jews of Djerba then, both female figures perhaps auger in a messianic age.

The Ghriba, as an associative correlate of the Shekhina, may allow the Djerban Jews an access point to the movement towards redemption, a more tangible means of interacting with the Zoharic imagery. In participating in a deeply *distinctively* Djerban rite, namely supplication of the Ghriba, the community expresses its commitment to *both* the rich legacy of Djerban Jewry and to an age, in the Promised Land, in which Shekhina reunites with God.

### **Djerban Messianic Songs**

The identification of the figure of the Ghriba with messianic longing (and by association, with the messianic imagery in the Zohar) can be corroborated by several of songs—excerpts of which I have translated below—which are central to the Lag B’Omer festivities, and are designated as “Songs for the Ghriba.” They are addressed, it seems, to both Rebbe Shimon (Sidi Bar Yohai) and to the Ghriba. Djerba’s local saint, who is in more intimate proximity, within the niche beneath their very own Torahs.

1        *“Rouhi maa il Galut/ Saboori, yaa Yerushalayim yetawasalni  
Fi il Ghena, wa fil biyoot”*<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Waite, 374.

<sup>256</sup> Djerban folksung, sung by Yaacov B’shiri on Lag B’Omer.

<sup>257</sup> Louisa Boucharis, Betigadi, Israel. July 2005, Song for the festival of the Ghriba, translation mine.

“My soul is with Exile/ Be patient, O Jerusalem will come to me  
In the song, and in the homes”

2 *Yaa Sidi Bar Yohai/ Semuaa li Israel/ Wa ila kalam meliha  
Jiina il Meshiah/ Kulshi yewuli meliha*”<sup>258</sup>

“O Sidi Bar Yohai/ Listen to Israel/ And to the good words/  
The Messiah will come to us/ Everything will become good.”

Both songs, integral to this festival of the Ghriba, remind that despite the connection to Djerba, past or present, this community will always feel intimately bound to their notion of another homeland as well. Myths of origin explain how a community conceptualizes itself in the greater universe: indeed, the connection to the fallen Temple of 586 B.C. will always be central to the Djerban Jewish identity. The question which remains, however, is whether things can *become good* on Djerban soil proper; can the Djerban Jews remain in Djerba while retaining a spiritual connection to Israel, or has this possibility been trumped by a new politicized and territorial connection to that land?

Perhaps this question requires another angle of analysis. I now shift to the Djerbans who *have* left Djerba, and now reside in Israel, and their relationship to both the pilgrimage to, and the synagogue of, the Ghriba. Most first-generation Djerban immigrants to Israel<sup>259</sup> live in moshavim—enclosed cooperative communities of several hundred. Some even feel a bit like replicas of the Haras. One woman who lives in Betigadi, one such community explains: “The atmosphere here is like Djerba. They do the holidays like in Djerba. The same bread, the same couscous. The moshav and Djerba are the same.”<sup>260</sup> Another woman

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<sup>258</sup> *ibid*, translation mine.

<sup>259</sup> There are probably several thousand first generation immigrants from Djerba in Israel, and many more of subsequent generations. Deshen, 1997, estimates 20,000 of the latter.

<sup>260</sup> Cohen, Shoshana. Betigadi, Israel. July 2005

confirms: “The moshav is just like Djerba. We do everything the same. We do Shabbat the same way. Kippur the same way.”<sup>261</sup> A family who came to Israel two years ago noted similarly: “It is like Djerba here. The holidays, Shabbat. The moshav resembles Djerba. In the moshav, everyone is religious, just like in Djerba. In the city, things are mixed.”<sup>262</sup>

In these villages, Djerban Jewish Arabic is the almost exclusive tongue for first generation immigrants. Djerban rituals are preserved (though not entirely: for example, the effigy-burning of Haman is not performed), and local Djerban dishes are prepared every day. The older Djerbans have remained *distinctly Djerban*, declining to assimilate into the Israeli experiment of diversity. Particularly in Betigadi, primarily composed of first generation immigrants (many of their children have moved to nearby towns), the Djerban lifestyle has been preserved. In younger moshavim like Tlamim and Brechia, where second generation immigrants have built homes and begun raising their own children, assimilation is more stark. These latter moshavim are more marked by Hebrew-speaking, though continue to retain many Djerban traditions. The moshavim illustrate that the Djerban Jews were always deeply conscious of their Djerbanness, and were in no way willing to efface it for an Israeli identity.

In Ofakim, a small village in the Negev, the Jews constructed a replica of the Ghriba in 1956,<sup>263</sup> and maintain a yearly pilgrimage on Lag B’Omer. Like in Djerba, “a large menara is brought in procession around the town and prayers are auctioned away. People come from all over the place. Though here, they don’t have the cave of the Ghriba with the eggs; that is only in Djerba.”<sup>264</sup> Ilon Khalfon, who pioneered the construction of the replica of the Ghriba notes: “We specifically made it to resemble the Ghriba so we could remember the

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<sup>261</sup> Boucharis, Louisa. Betigadi, Israel. July 2005

<sup>262</sup> Rachel Zouza, Betigadi, Israel, July 2005

<sup>263</sup> Ilon Khalfon, Ofakim, Israel, July 2005

<sup>264</sup> Dvorah Cohen, Ofakim, Israel, July 2005



Ghriba.”<sup>265</sup> A second-generation immigrant notes: “In the synagogue, they have maintained the same rules and the same tunes of the prayers. We used to have a Rabbi ten years ago who had come directly from Djerba with the prayers, no questions. After he died, there was no substitute.”<sup>266</sup> The reconstruction of the Ghriba and its pilgrimage indicate that for the Djerban emigrants (first and subsequent generations) maintenance of the *Djerban* part of their identities is essential.

Moreover, the Djerban version of Lag B’Omer in Israel has not been eclipsed by the Israeli version. Israeli Lag B’Omer concentrates on the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-35 AD) against Roman dominion. Zerubavel quotes a brochure on the holiday directed to primary school students: “the Zionist movement turned [Lag B’Omer] into a holiday [that promotes] national values: the struggle for freedom, military heroism, and the hope for redemption.”<sup>267</sup> The celebration of Bar Kokhba is ironic, as “his revolt ended in defeat;” he is instead remembered “as a legendary hero who led the people to freedom.”<sup>268</sup> This particularly Israeli commemoration has in no way subordinated Djerban versions of the festival. Every Djerban I interviewed in Israel emphasized the importance of the Ghriba and of Shimon Bar Yohai in the festival, sidelined elements in the Israeli version.<sup>269</sup>

In Jerusalem, a Ghriba center was established 15 years ago.<sup>270</sup> Its founder notes:

Most of the Djerbans in Israel are proud of their heritage. The Ghriba is something which connects the Djerban Jewry here. Every Djerban can tell the story about Dighet and the door and the Cohenime coming from the Temple after the second destruction. They are very proud of their heritage. They know Djerba is a unique community.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Ilon Khalfon, Ofakim, Israel, July 2005

<sup>266</sup> D. Peres, Ofakim, Israel, July 2005

<sup>267</sup> Zerubavel, 99.

<sup>268</sup> Zerubavel, xviii.

<sup>269</sup> Zerubavel, 99-100.

<sup>270</sup> Ephraim Hazan, Jerusalem, Israel, July 2005.

<sup>271</sup> *ibid.*

The mission statement of the Ghriba center is explained on the newsletters: “l’association veut sauvegarder le patrimoine du judaïsme tunisien, l’enseigner et le propager le plus possible.”<sup>272</sup> The letter further elucidates the desire to mark the ancient nature of the Djerban Jewish community, and to offer Tunisian Jews a vital cultural source of connection to their original roots. One article in the publication commemorates the great Djerban Rabbi Khalfon, noting that the Rabbi, after the Balfour Declaration of 1919, created a Zionist group in Djerba called Atheret Zion. The article elaborates on the Djerbans: “leur conception englobait Judaïsme-sionisme unis et jamiâs divisés.” For the organization, there is both a sense of immense continuity between Djerba and Israel and a notion of deep Djerban distinctiveness, which demands preservation.

### **Concluding Questions and Remarks**

Udovitch, interpreting the Lag B’Omer pilgrimage through Zoharic imagery, notes that the community symbolically meets its Lord. However, my ultimate query is, is it simultaneously able to meet *itself*? Can it meet its Others, its surrounding community? It is my contention that the community has been increasingly less able to meet its *current context* in the last fifty years. As the majority of the Jews have departed Tunisia, those who have remained have become, perhaps, more psychologically alienated from their surroundings. This is due to the escalating hostilities in the Arab world, (in recent years, the Intifada), and perhaps to the Djerban Jewish notion that they can no longer fully retain both *Jewish* identity and *Djerban* identity.

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<sup>272</sup> “Association El Ghriba:” Jerusalem, 2004.

In the last fifty years, a spiritual concept was made tangible. Eliade's mythical "eternal return" became a temporal return. Exiting the realm of myth, a reality with complex consequences was bequeathed upon the Djerban Jews: those who left, indeed, but also those who stayed behind. Whereas previously, Djerban Jews could express their connection to Israel as a remote messianic land, an almost mystical possibility, they can no longer do so. Now that Israel exists *as a State*, they have come to couch the question in politics of "us versus them." As Djerban Muslims emotionally identify with the Palestinians, Djerban Jews emotionally identify with the Israelis. This "us" versus "them" question has been transplanted in a *new and virulent form* onto Tunisian soil.

Meanwhile, this shift has coincided with more concrete contact between Jews and Muslims on Djerba. The Hara has become mixed due to emigration of Jews, and more Jewish children have been attending mixed state schools for part of the day with Muslim children. In another atmosphere, this increased contact might help forge better understanding between the groups. This may occur in some cases, but I believe that the opposite situation has become the norm. Although boundaries between the two communities have always existed and have been maintained scrupulously to avoid assimilation and inter-marriage, they were perhaps never of the ilk of the boundaries which have developed in the last fifty years and now characterize much of Jewish-Muslim interaction on Djerba. The remaining Djerban Jews in Djerba have imagined themselves into another landscape; in this, they have rendered home single and elsewhere.

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