

# history of jews in morocco

The history of Jews in Morocco is a rich tapestry woven over more than two millennia, a narrative of resilience, cultural exchange, and significant contributions to both Jewish and Moroccan societies. From their ancient origins in North Africa to their eventual diaspora, Moroccan Jews have left an indelible mark on the religious, economic, and cultural landscape of the region. This comprehensive exploration delves into the various epochs of Jewish presence in Morocco, examining their settlements, religious life, economic activities, social interactions, and the profound impact of historical events on their community. Understanding the history of Jews in Morocco offers a unique perspective on interfaith relations, cultural synthesis, and the enduring legacy of a vibrant Jewish civilization in the Maghreb.

- Ancient Origins and Early Settlements of Jews in Morocco
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- The Arrival of Islam and the Golden Age of Moroccan Jewry
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- The Impact of Zionism and the Mass Aliyah to Israel
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## Ancient Origins and Early Settlements of Jews in Morocco

The presence of Jews in Morocco dates back to antiquity, with traditions and archaeological evidence suggesting settlements even before the Roman conquest. It is widely believed that Phoenician traders, some of whom were Jewish, established early trading posts along the North African coast, including in areas that would become Morocco. These initial Jewish communities were likely small, consisting of merchants and artisans who found economic opportunities in the burgeoning coastal cities. The fertile lands and trade routes of Morocco provided a promising environment for these early

pioneers. Over centuries, these nascent communities grew and integrated, forming the bedrock of what would become a long-standing and significant Jewish presence in the region. The exact timeline of their arrival is debated, but the persistence of Jewish life throughout Moroccan history points to very early origins.

## **Theories of Early Jewish Migration to Morocco**

Several theories attempt to explain the initial waves of Jewish migration to Morocco. One prominent theory suggests that Jews arrived in North Africa during the First Temple period, driven by economic opportunities and escaping instability in the Levant. Another theory posits that significant migrations occurred after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, with Jewish refugees seeking new homes. Additionally, it's possible that Jews arrived with various waves of settlers, including the Phoenicians and later the Romans, integrating into existing populations. The diverse origins likely contributed to the rich cultural mosaic of Moroccan Jewry.

## **Early Jewish Communities and Their Economic Roles**

From their earliest settlements, Jews in Morocco played crucial roles in the local economies. They were often involved in trade, crafts, and agriculture. Their skills as artisans and merchants allowed them to establish connections and networks that spanned across North Africa and the Mediterranean. This early economic engagement laid the foundation for the continued prosperity and influence of Jewish communities in Morocco throughout subsequent historical periods. Their ability to adapt and thrive in different economic sectors was a hallmark of their resilience.

## **The Roman and Vandal Periods: Jewish Life Under Foreign Rule**

The Roman conquest of North Africa, including what is now Morocco, brought new political structures and cultural influences, but Jewish communities largely continued to thrive. Under Roman rule, Jews were generally afforded a degree of religious tolerance, allowing their communities to maintain their institutions and practices. While they were subject to Roman law and taxation, their internal religious and communal affairs were often left to their own leadership. The period saw the establishment of more organized Jewish communities, with synagogues and communal structures becoming more prominent. However, like other subject populations, they also experienced the burdens of imperial rule, including levies and occasional unrest.

## **Jewish Settlements During the Roman Empire**

During the Roman era, Jewish settlements were found in several key cities across Roman North Africa, including in parts of present-day Morocco. Cities like Volubilis, Tingis (modern Tangier), and Sala Colonia likely had significant Jewish populations. Archaeological finds, such as inscriptions and remains of synagogues, attest to their presence and communal organization. These communities were often situated in strategic locations, facilitating their engagement in trade and commerce within the vast Roman network. The Roman infrastructure, including roads and ports, further aided their economic activities.

## **Jewish Identity and Interaction with Roman Society**

Jewish identity remained distinct within the Roman Empire. While interacting with Roman culture and administration, Jewish communities maintained their religious laws, customs, and educational systems. They were recognized as a distinct religious group, with certain privileges and obligations. However, periods of tension could arise, particularly during times of general unrest or when Roman policies infringed upon Jewish religious practices. The spread of Christianity within the Empire eventually introduced new dynamics, though the full impact on Jewish communities in Morocco during this early period is less documented than in other Roman provinces.

## **The Arrival of Islam and the Golden Age of Moroccan Jewry**

The advent of Islam in North Africa in the 7th century marked a significant turning point in the history of Jews in Morocco. While the initial Arab conquest brought new political and religious dynamics, Jewish communities, like other dhimmis (protected minorities), were generally granted religious freedom and the right to practice their faith under Islamic rule. This period ushered in what is often referred to as a "Golden Age" for Moroccan Jewry, characterized by intellectual flourishing, economic prosperity, and a significant degree of communal autonomy. Jewish scholars and artisans contributed immensely to the vibrant cultural and economic life of Moroccan cities.

## **The Dhimmi Status and Jewish Autonomy**

Under Islamic rule, Jews, along with Christians, were granted the status of dhimmis. This status provided protection of life, property, and freedom of religion in exchange for loyalty to the Muslim ruler and the payment of a special tax (jizya). While this status implied a degree of subservience and certain restrictions, it also allowed Jewish communities to maintain their

own religious courts, schools, and leadership structures. This internal autonomy was crucial for the preservation of Jewish traditions and the flourishing of communal life. The degree of adherence to dhimmi regulations varied across different dynasties and regions.

## **Economic Contributions and Trade Networks**

Moroccan Jews played a vital role in the economy of the various Islamic dynasties that ruled the region. They were deeply involved in international trade, connecting Morocco with markets in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. They excelled in various crafts, including textiles, metalworking, and leather production, and were often employed as financiers, tax collectors, and skilled artisans. Their linguistic abilities and established trade networks made them indispensable intermediaries in many economic ventures. This economic dynamism contributed significantly to the overall prosperity of Moroccan society.

## **Medieval Jewish Communities and their Economic Power**

During the medieval period, spanning various Islamic dynasties like the Almoravids, Almohads, and Marinids, Jewish communities in Morocco solidified their economic influence. Cities such as Fes, Marrakesh, and Sijilmasa became important centers of Jewish life and commerce. Jewish merchants were instrumental in facilitating trade routes, particularly the trans-Saharan trade, bringing goods like gold, salt, and ivory into Morocco and exporting manufactured goods. Their financial acumen and access to international networks made them key players in the economic fabric of the kingdom.

## **The Role of Jewish Merchants and Financiers**

Jewish merchants, often referred to as "Tujjar" or "Shutuṭ," were pivotal in managing the complex trade networks that linked Morocco to the wider world. They acted as financiers, providing capital for expeditions and enterprises, and were often entrusted with significant financial responsibilities by rulers. Their reliability and expertise made them sought-after partners in commercial ventures. The stability and prosperity of many Moroccan cities were, to a large extent, dependent on the thriving economic activities of their Jewish populations.

## **Artisanal Skills and Craftsmanship**

Beyond trade, Moroccan Jews were renowned for their craftsmanship. They excelled in various artisanal fields, including the production of fine

textiles, intricate metalwork, leather goods, and pottery. These skills not only met the needs of the local population but also produced goods for export, further enhancing Morocco's economic standing. The reputation of Moroccan Jewish artisans extended far beyond the borders of the kingdom, contributing to the perception of Morocco as a hub of skilled labor and quality production.

## **Religious and Cultural Flourishing: Saints, Scholars, and Synagogues**

The medieval and early modern periods witnessed a profound religious and cultural flourishing within Moroccan Jewish communities. This era saw the emergence of numerous revered saints (tzaddikim), scholars, and poets whose influence extended across the diaspora. Synagogues were not merely places of worship but also centers of learning and community life, often showcasing impressive architecture and artistic design. The preservation and transmission of Jewish law, philosophy, and mysticism were paramount, ensuring the continuity of Jewish tradition.

### **Prominent Rabbis and Religious Leaders**

Morocco produced a lineage of highly influential rabbis and religious leaders who guided their communities and contributed to Jewish scholarship. Figures like Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (Rif) in the 11th century, who codified Jewish law, and Maimonides, who spent significant time in Morocco and whose philosophical works profoundly influenced Jewish thought, are among the most celebrated. These scholars, often deeply rooted in Kabbalah and Talmudic studies, ensured the intellectual vibrancy of Moroccan Jewry. Their teachings and interpretations of Jewish law shaped religious life for centuries.

### **The Significance of Synagogues and Religious Sites**

Synagogues in Morocco were more than just places of prayer; they were vital community hubs. Many were architectural marvels, reflecting local artistic traditions and the prosperity of their congregants. Sites associated with revered saints, such as the tomb of Rabbi Judah ben Saul ibn Tibbon in Fes or the burial site of Rabbi Amram ben Diwan in Ouazzane, became important pilgrimage destinations, drawing Jews from across Morocco and even from abroad. These sacred sites fostered a sense of collective identity and spiritual continuity.

### **Kabbalah and Mystical Traditions in Morocco**

Moroccan Jewish communities were also deeply engaged with Kabbalah, the

system of Jewish mysticism. Mystical traditions and practices played a significant role in the spiritual life of many. The study of Kabbalistic texts and the veneration of Kabbalistic masters were common, influencing religious devotion and communal rituals. The city of Ouazzane, in particular, became a prominent center for Kabbalistic thought and practice, attracting students and pilgrims seeking spiritual guidance and enlightenment.

## **The Mellah Era: Segregation and Jewish Life in Walled Quarters**

The establishment of mellahs, or Jewish quarters, became a defining feature of urban Jewish life in Morocco from the 15th century onwards, particularly during the Saadian and Alaouite dynasties. While initially conceived as a form of protection for Jewish communities, the mellah gradually evolved into a system of segregation, reflecting a shift in the socio-political landscape. These walled districts, often located within or adjacent to the main cities, concentrated Jewish populations and their institutions, leading to both unique communal development and increased social stratification.

### **Origins and Purpose of the Mellah System**

The creation of mellahs was a complex phenomenon with origins rooted in both protective measures and societal segregation. Some historical accounts suggest that rulers designated specific areas for Jews to safeguard them from potential unrest or to consolidate their administration. However, over time, the mellah also became a physical manifestation of the dhimmi status, separating Jews from the Muslim majority. This segregation facilitated the preservation of Jewish identity and communal autonomy but also limited their interaction with broader Moroccan society and sometimes led to overcrowding and poorer living conditions.

### **Daily Life and Community Structure within the Mellah**

Life within the mellah was characterized by a strong sense of community and self-governance. Jewish law and customs were paramount, and communal institutions, including synagogues, schools (yeshivot), and charitable organizations, thrived within these enclaves. While interactions with the outside world were regulated, Jews within the mellah maintained their distinctive cultural practices, traditions, and economic activities. The mellah fostered a close-knit society where religious and communal life were deeply intertwined with daily existence.

## **Socio-Economic Conditions and Challenges in the Mellahs**

While the mellah offered a degree of protection and autonomy, it also presented challenges. Overcrowding, limited space for expansion, and often less favorable economic opportunities compared to mixed neighborhoods could be prevalent. However, within these confines, Jewish communities demonstrated remarkable resilience, fostering vibrant economic activity and maintaining their cultural heritage. The economic success of some individuals and families sometimes contrasted with the overall socio-economic conditions of the mellah, leading to internal social dynamics.

## **European Influence and the Modernization of Moroccan Jewish Society**

The 19th and 20th centuries brought significant European influence to Morocco, driven by colonial ambitions and increased trade. This era profoundly impacted Moroccan Jewish society, introducing new economic opportunities, educational systems, and cultural trends. European powers, particularly France and Spain, exerted considerable influence, which had a dual effect: it led to the modernization and integration of some Jewish communities into the global economy, while also exacerbating social and economic disparities within the community and fostering new forms of identity.

## **The Impact of Colonialism and European Powers**

The presence of European colonial powers in Morocco led to a greater integration of Moroccan Jews into international economic systems. European-administered schools and businesses offered new opportunities, and some Jews benefited from the administrative structures and legal frameworks introduced by the colonial powers. However, this also meant that Jewish communities were often caught between competing European interests and emerging Moroccan nationalism. The establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French Jewish organization, played a significant role in providing modern secular and religious education to Jewish children across Morocco.

## **Modern Education and Changing Social Dynamics**

The introduction of modern educational institutions, including those run by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, brought about significant changes in Moroccan Jewish society. These schools provided a Western-style education, exposing students to new ideas and opportunities. This led to a rise in a Western-educated elite within the Jewish community, who often found roles in international commerce, diplomacy, and administration. This modernization

process also created generational shifts and altered traditional social hierarchies, as new avenues for social mobility opened up.

## **Economic Shifts and Professionalization**

The economic landscape shifted considerably with European involvement. While traditional crafts and trade continued, new professions emerged in sectors influenced by European investment and enterprise. Moroccan Jews increasingly entered fields such as finance, law, medicine, and journalism. This professionalization of the community allowed for greater economic integration into the modern Moroccan state, but it also contributed to a diversification of economic experiences among Jews, with some achieving considerable success while others remained in traditional roles.

## **The Impact of Zionism and the Mass Aliyah to Israel**

The rise of Zionism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coupled with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, had a profound and transformative impact on Jewish communities worldwide, including in Morocco. The Zionist movement provided a new ideological focus and a sense of collective destiny for many Moroccan Jews. Following the establishment of Israel, a significant wave of emigration, known as Aliyah, saw the majority of Moroccan Jews depart for their ancestral homeland, drastically reshaping the demographic landscape of Moroccan Jewry.

## **Early Zionist Activity in Morocco**

Zionist organizations began to gain traction in Morocco in the early 20th century. These groups focused on raising awareness about the Zionist cause, collecting funds for settlement in Palestine, and promoting Hebrew language and culture. The appeals of Zionism resonated with many Moroccan Jews, offering a vision of a safe haven and a renewed Jewish national identity. Despite challenges and sometimes governmental restrictions, Zionist activities persevered, fostering a growing commitment to the idea of a Jewish homeland.

## **The Mass Emigration to Israel**

Following the establishment of Israel, Morocco became a primary source of Jewish immigrants. Between 1948 and the mid-1960s, hundreds of thousands of Moroccan Jews made Aliyah. This mass emigration was driven by a complex set of factors, including the burgeoning hope of a Jewish state, economic opportunities, and sometimes a sense of insecurity in post-colonial North

Africa. The departure of the vast majority of Moroccan Jews marked the end of millennia of continuous Jewish presence in many Moroccan cities, fundamentally altering the religious and cultural character of the nation.

## **The Experience of Moroccan Jews in Israel**

Upon arrival in Israel, Moroccan Jews, like other Mizrahi (Eastern) communities, faced unique challenges in integration. They often encountered cultural differences and experienced social and economic disparities compared to European Jewish immigrants. However, over time, they have made significant contributions to Israeli society in all spheres. The rich cultural heritage of Moroccan Jewry, including its music, cuisine, and religious traditions, has become an integral part of the broader Israeli cultural mosaic. Efforts continue to preserve and celebrate this distinct heritage.

## **The Present Day: A Legacy of Moroccan Jews**

Although the demographic landscape of Jews in Morocco has dramatically changed due to the mass Aliyah, a vibrant Jewish community, albeit a much smaller one, continues to exist in Morocco today. This community is a testament to the enduring resilience and deep historical roots of Jewish life in the country. Their presence, though numerically reduced, represents a living connection to a rich past and plays a vital role in preserving the heritage of Moroccan Jewry. Furthermore, the Moroccan diaspora, scattered across the globe, actively maintains connections to their Moroccan heritage, ensuring its continuity and influence.

## **The Contemporary Moroccan Jewish Community**

The current Jewish community in Morocco is primarily concentrated in Casablanca, with smaller communities in Rabat and Marrakesh. This community, numbering a few thousand, is largely composed of older individuals whose families have lived in Morocco for generations. They maintain their synagogues, community centers, and cultural activities, actively preserving their traditions and religious practices. The Moroccan government, under King Mohammed VI, has shown increased support for the Jewish heritage and its preservation, recognizing its integral role in the nation's history and identity.

## **The Moroccan Jewish Diaspora and Cultural Preservation**

The vast majority of Moroccan Jews now reside outside Morocco, with significant communities in Israel, France, Canada, the United States, and

elsewhere. These diaspora communities are actively engaged in preserving and celebrating their rich cultural heritage. They organize festivals, cultural events, and religious gatherings that showcase Moroccan Jewish traditions, music, cuisine, and literature. These efforts ensure that the legacy of Moroccan Jewry is passed down to future generations and that their unique cultural contributions continue to be recognized globally.

## **The Enduring Impact on Moroccan Heritage**

The history of Jews in Morocco is deeply interwoven with the broader history and cultural heritage of Morocco itself. The contributions of Moroccan Jews to the arts, sciences, economy, and intellectual life of the nation are undeniable. Their presence has enriched Morocco's cultural tapestry, fostering a tradition of coexistence and mutual influence. The preservation of Jewish historical sites, synagogues, and cemeteries across Morocco is a crucial aspect of acknowledging and honoring this enduring legacy, ensuring that the story of Jews in Morocco remains an integral part of the national narrative.

## **Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Jews in Morocco**

The history of Jews in Morocco is a profound narrative of a community that, for over two thousand years, thrived, contributed, and endured in North Africa. From ancient origins and early trade ventures to the sophisticated intellectual and economic life under Islamic rule, Moroccan Jewry developed a unique cultural identity deeply intertwined with the land and its people. Despite periods of challenge and eventual mass emigration, the legacy of Jews in Morocco continues to resonate. The vibrant diaspora communities actively preserve and celebrate their rich heritage, while the enduring presence in Morocco itself serves as a living testament to their historical significance. Understanding this history offers invaluable insights into religious tolerance, cultural synthesis, and the complex, yet often harmonious, coexistence of diverse communities within a shared historical space.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **When did Jews first arrive in Morocco, and what were the main factors influencing their presence?**

Jewish presence in Morocco dates back over two millennia, with evidence suggesting arrivals possibly as early as the Carthaginian period and certainly during Roman times. The main factors influencing their presence were trade routes, seeking refuge from persecution in other regions (like

Roman Judea), and the economic opportunities offered by Morocco's fertile lands and coastal cities. They established vibrant communities, often contributing significantly to the local economy and culture.

## **What was the historical relationship between Jewish and Muslim communities in Morocco?**

The relationship between Jewish and Muslim communities in Morocco was generally characterized by coexistence and mutual influence for much of history, although with periods of varying tolerance and restriction. Under Muslim rule (Arab and Berber dynasties), Jews often held the status of 'dhimmi,' granting them protection and the right to practice their religion in exchange for a special tax (jizya) and certain societal limitations. While tensions and discrimination existed, many Jewish communities thrived and integrated into Moroccan society, contributing to its intellectual and economic life.

## **What was the significance of the Mellah in Moroccan cities?**

The Mellah (Arabic for 'salt marsh') was a distinct quarter or ghetto where the Jewish population of Moroccan cities was historically confined. These areas provided a measure of autonomy and security for Jewish communities, allowing them to maintain their religious and cultural practices. While initially a segregating measure, the Mellah also became centers of vibrant Jewish life, with their own synagogues, schools, and communal institutions, and often became bustling commercial hubs.

## **What major historical events impacted the Jewish population of Morocco, particularly in the 20th century?**

The 20th century brought significant changes. The French and Spanish protectorates introduced some modernizing influences but also contributed to shifting social dynamics. However, the most impactful event was the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent wave of decolonization across North Africa. These developments led to a mass emigration of Moroccan Jews, primarily to Israel, France, and Canada, seeking new opportunities and sometimes fleeing rising Arab nationalism and antisemitism, drastically reducing the once large and vibrant Jewish population.

## **What is the current state of Jewish life in Morocco?**

While the vast majority of Moroccan Jews emigrated in the mid-to-late 20th century, a small but active Jewish community still exists in Morocco today, primarily in Casablanca and a few other cities. These communities maintain their synagogues, cultural institutions, and continue to be respected by the

Moroccan government. Morocco actively promotes its Jewish heritage, with efforts to preserve historical synagogues, cemeteries, and cultural sites, recognizing the significant contributions of Jews to the nation's history and identity.

## Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the history of Jews in Morocco, with short descriptions:

1. The Jews of Morocco: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day by Walter Fischel. This comprehensive work delves into the long and complex history of Jewish communities in Morocco, tracing their presence from antiquity through periods of significant social, political, and religious change. Fischel meticulously details the evolution of Jewish life, culture, and interactions with the broader Moroccan society. It serves as a foundational text for understanding the rich heritage of Moroccan Jewry.
2. A Moroccan Jewish Life: The Memoirs of David Assouline by David Assouline. This deeply personal memoir offers a vivid and intimate glimpse into the life of a Moroccan Jew growing up in the mid-20th century. Assouline recounts his experiences in a vibrant community, detailing family life, education, and the cultural tapestry that defined his youth. His narrative captures the essence of traditional Jewish life in Morocco before the mass emigration.
3. Moroccan Jewry: Its History and Heritage by Haim Zafrani. Zafrani, a renowned scholar of Sephardic Jewry, presents a scholarly yet accessible overview of Moroccan Jewish history and culture. The book explores the legal, social, and religious structures that shaped Jewish communities across Morocco, highlighting their intellectual contributions and artistic expressions. It emphasizes the continuity of traditions and the unique identity forged within the Moroccan context.
4. The Mellah of Marrakech: Jewish Life in Medieval and Modern Morocco by Aviva Klein-Franke. This study focuses specifically on the Mellah, the Jewish quarter of Marrakech, examining its development and the daily lives of its inhabitants over centuries. Klein-Franke uses archaeological evidence, historical documents, and oral traditions to reconstruct the social and economic realities of this important Jewish center. The book sheds light on the spatial organization and community dynamics within the Mellah.
5. The Echo of the Past: Sephardic Tradition in Morocco and the Diaspora by Yitzchak Kerem. Kerem investigates the enduring impact of Sephardic traditions on Moroccan Jewry and their subsequent dispersion throughout the world. He explores the preservation of Ladino language, musical heritage, and religious customs among Moroccan Jews both in their homeland and in their new communities. The book examines the resilience of culture and identity across geographical divides.

6. \_When Morocco Was Jewish: A History of the Jews of Morocco\_ by Daniel J. Schroeter. Schroeter offers a nuanced historical account of the Jewish experience in Morocco, emphasizing the dynamic interactions between Jewish and Muslim populations. He analyzes the evolving status of Jews under various ruling dynasties and the factors that contributed to both coexistence and tension. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the socio-economic and political landscape in which Moroccan Jewry thrived.

7. \_The Jews of North Africa: From the Arab Conquest to the Present Day\_ by Maurice Attal. While covering a broader region, Attal dedicates significant attention to the distinct history of Moroccan Jews within the larger North African context. He examines the influence of Arab conquest, the establishment of Muslim rule, and the ensuing cultural synthesis that characterized Jewish life. The book highlights the specific challenges and opportunities faced by Moroccan Jewry throughout history.

8. \_The Last Arabs of Andalusia: The Jews of Morocco, 1492-1970\_ by Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi. Yerushalmi's seminal work explores the legacy of the Spanish expulsion on Moroccan Jewry, detailing the influx of Sephardic refugees and their integration into existing communities. He analyzes the cultural and religious transformations that occurred as a result of this migration, and how Moroccan Jewry maintained its distinct identity. The book is a key text for understanding the Sephardic influence on Moroccan Jewish life.

9. \_The Jews of Morocco and the Ottoman Empire: Diplomatic and Economic Relations, 1880-1914\_ by Sarah Stein. Stein's research uncovers the intricate diplomatic and economic connections between Moroccan Jewish communities and the Ottoman Empire during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She examines how external powers and economic interests influenced the lives of Moroccan Jews, and their role in broader regional networks. The book provides a fresh perspective on the international context of Moroccan Jewish history.

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