

## **From the Mellah in Marrakesh to Israel and back**

### **A case study by Gil Kenan**

#### **Introduction**

Israel is the promised land of Jewish immigrants who have a shared heritage. As a multi-cultural society, the Israel society demonstrates an unexpected richness and diversity of ethnic groups, a multiplicity of origins, and a wide range of different voices and cultural traditions. One of the visible and material appearances of this social phenomenon is the emerge and the presence of associations, heritage centers and ethnic museums of each of those immigrant communities. Shared heritage is a process that reinforces identities, values, and relationships in the present. As such, the practices of heritage centers and ethnic museum as well as visitors might be considered 'heritage work' which serves social purposes in the present.

Museums, National archives, Associations and Heritage centers are considered as realms of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) (Nora, 1993). They are conceived as transmitters striving to tell the story of communities and nations. They are important in the construction of group identity and are the sites where the collective is on symbolic display. Their declared goal is to act as realms of memory and via that

purpose they provide focal points for the construction of ethnic entities and provide the basis for new identities, and a re-formulation of the cultural shared heritage  
In the 1950s, my father immigrated to Israel at the age of fifteen from his homeland city and the streets of the Mellah in Marrakesh, Morocco. <sup>1</sup> In 1985 my father founded "The Marrakesh Jewish Association in Israel" with the aim of preserving and representing the heritage of the Marrakesh Jewish community. <sup>2</sup>

The research deals with questions of shared heritage and community. It focuses on the Jewish community of Marrakesh and their journey in space and time; A journey from the Mellah in Marrakesh, their dispersing to settlements in the periphery of the State of Israel and reuniting in the imaginary streets of the Mellah in Hayarkon Park, in Tel Aviv. It describes the "great journey" the immigrants made with an emphasis on their re-gathering, and reunification thanks to a heritage association established by my father - "The Marrakesh Jewish Association in Israel". To understand the motives underlying the association, I interviewed my father - David Vaknin Keinan, who was one of the organization's initiators and leader and served as the association's chairman for about 35 years. Additionally, there is a visual journey of 3 maps which I created to understand the above-mentioned "path". The 3 different maps are indicating three different locations in time, and visually marking the physical and mental distance of Marrakesh community members from their hometown.

At the starting point of this research pathway, I thought it is only my personal story, but following the research's working, searching through the archives, reading theoretical literature, interviewing, and listening to many stories of Moroccan immigrants and of Jews of Marrakesh, I realized that my personal story is the story of a community, the tale of us all.

Like the cumulative culture of mankind, which is comprised of innumerable human beings, each one an entire world, comprising a complicated and one-time existence, indebted with mysterious wonder and infinite richness of shades and colors, of stories worth being told, such are as well, mankind's communities. Each community is a parable, in my opinion, for an individual, who's story is unique and worth telling. I hope that in this work, I will succeed in shedding light on the legacy

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGJWulAQhIk>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.facebook.com/groups/1857181881238068/>

of an entirely unique, special, and colorful community- the community of the immigrants of Marrakesh.

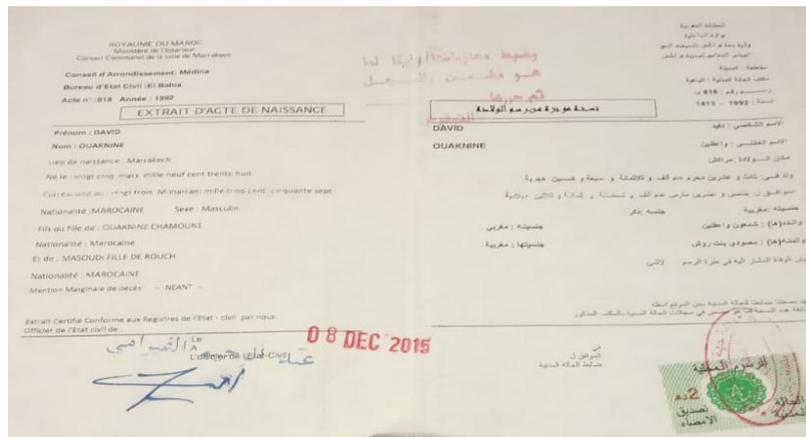


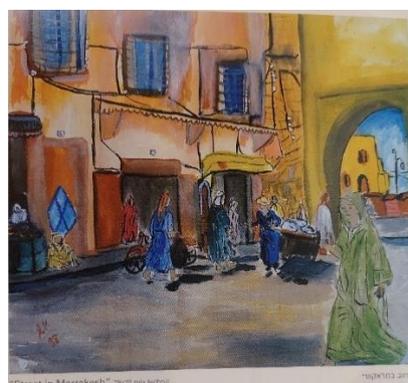
Photo: Birth certificate of my father (David Vaknin Kenan), Marrakesh, Morocco 1938 (© Gil Kenan)

## Historical context: The Jews of Marrakesh and the immigration to Israel

- **Marrakesh, The Jews of Marrakesh, and The Mellah**

### Marrakesh

Marrakesh is one of the five capital cities of Morocco, and it is mid-southwestern capital, and today it is the second largest city in Morocco and has a population of about two million. The city was founded in 1070 and is one of the most beautiful and unique cities in the world, known as the Red City, or Red Marrakesh, owing to the deep pink and hue of its medina walls and buildings. Additionally, its natural landscape combines a rare contrast of desert character on the one hand, due to the warm climate and the hundreds of thousands of palm trees that surround it. And on the other hand, Marrakesh is spectacularly bordered by the Atlas Mountains with its snow-capped peaks to the south and the Jbilet hills to the north. This combination gives the city a rare beauty at any hour of the day.



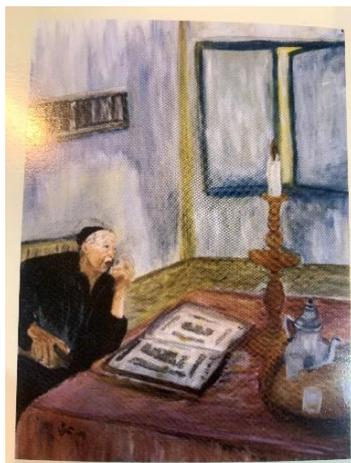
"Street of Marakesh" 2005. A painting display on an exhibition by Elisha Sheerit, "Pictures from the Life of Jews in Morocco."

Marrakesh comprises an old, fortified city, surrounded a wall with magnificent, well-preserved gates. The medina quarter (old city) is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its traditional marketplace Jemaa el-Fnaa, and in its southern part, the old Jewish Quarter (Mellah). West of the medina is the Ville Nouvelle Hivernage and Guliz neighborhoods which built in the early 20th century during the French Protectorate in Morocco.



*The mellah alleys of Marrakesh (© Gil Kenan)*

### **The Jews of Marrakesh**



*"Studying Tora" 2005. A painting display on an exhibition by Elisha Sheetrit, "Pictures from the Life of Jews in Morocco."*

Jews have come to Marrakesh since its founding in 1062. The Jews came to Morocco in two major waves. The first one is commonly linked with the destruction of the Temple (586 BC) (Bar-Asher, 1976). Most of the Jews settled in rural areas, mostly in the south of Morocco in the mountainous Atlas region, where they had close and prolonged interaction with the Amazigh (Berber) groups, who had also settled there before the Arabs (Toledano, 1984). The second wave came when Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, after the Inquisition at the end of fifteenth century (1391- 1492). These Meghorachim (the expelled), thanks to the contacts they maintained with the Portuguese who were established in the coastal areas. The Meghorachim began to live in moderate comfort and handled occupations and commercial affairs (such as finance) that Islam proscribed to Muslims. Cardeira da Silva, 2018).

Communal life, for the duration of hundreds of years, blurred the distinctions between the two groups, and everything that distinguished one from the other was in relation to family names. For example, Biton, Vaknin, Abitbol, Darai etc. were common names of the "inhabitants". Rozilio, Pinto, Dhaloya, Kourkus, Kabsa, etc. were implicative family names of the "exiled". Additional differences were found in ritual slaughter, in the text of the Ketubah (ketubah in the Castile custom and Ketubah in the regional custom). Until a relatively later period, the community's leadership and Rabbis were among the descendants of the exiled (Pinto, Azoulai, Kourkus, Rozilio).



*The ancient Jewish cemetery in Marrakesh (© Gil Kenan)*

The Jewish community of Marrakesh was among the largest of the communities in Morocco, and Marrakesh was a spiritual and cultural center to its inhabitants who were spread out between the Atlas Mountains, at the entrances to the Sahara, and in the coastal cities. Cases, too difficult for rural judges, were brought before the judges of Marrakesh. Youths, from rural villages, came to study at the yeshivot of Marrakesh. This was also the center of learning for ritual slaughter and certification was there given, to work in this profession. Marrakesh was also the only economic center for villagers and city dwellers. In prosperous times, the Jews enjoyed economic profit, governmental protection, and a small minority were even employed as translators, advisors, and diplomats. In times of anarchy and changes of government, the Jews suffered from persecution, theft, looting, and murder.

### **The "Mellah" - the Jewish quarter of Marrakesh**

*"Of all the "Mellah" present in each of the cities of Morocco, the "Mellah" of Marrakesh is the most important one" (Périgny, 1918, p. 137).*



*My parents in the mellah alleys of Marrakech (© Gil Kenan)*

Within the medina, - the Old City of Marrakesh, - in an area between the Bahia Palace and the Royal Palace, is the "Mellah" - the Jewish quarter of Marrakesh. The walled Jewish quarter of Marrakesh was called a Mellah, a name that originally referred to the salty marsh area to which the Jews of the northern Morocco had been transferred. Jews of Marrakesh were transferred to their new quarter during the reign of the Sa'di dyn (1511-1659). Based on The Jews of Marrakesh oral tradition, scholars present the year 1557 as the date of the creation of the Marrakesh It was a

kind of closed ghetto, built to protect them. The status of the Jews was that of protégés. The usual explanation of the phenomenon of Mellahization in Morocco is that keeping the Jews within proximity to the Kasbah made it easier for the sultan, who was the patron of the Jews, to protect them from aggressors while allowing the makhzan (royal administration) taxation and control. The patronage was in accordance with religious law: in return for a skull tax the Jews were entitled to physical security, religious autonomy, and fair trial (Gottreich, 2003, 287-295).

During the 16th century, the Mellah had its own fountains, gardens, synagogues, and markets. Until the arrival of the French in 1912, Jews could not own property outside of the Mellah. therefore, the growth was within the limits of the neighborhood, resulting in narrow streets, small shops, and higher residential buildings. The Slat al-Azama Synagogue (or Lazama Synagogue), built around a central courtyard, is within the Medina in the Mellah. On land adjacent to the Mellah is the Jewish cemetery which is the largest of its kind in Morocco Characterized by white-washed tombs and sandy graves.

Most of the Jews were artisans, and financier, moneylenders, gold and silversmiths, tailors, metalworkers, sugar traders and peddlers. In the nineteenth century, the Jewish population, which focused on its synagogue, ritual baths, schools, and courts of law, was strengthened by a constant flow of Jewish craftsmen, including bankers, jewelers, embroiderers, and musicians; pilgrims visiting saint's graves, rabbinical students, and Palestinian Jews seeking donations.

Although the majority of the Mellah population were Jews, the Mellah was not a Jewish ghetto and never quite achieved the ideal of an exclusively Jewish space, but also a quarter for non-Muslims. In the late nineteenth century, the Mellah provided a place to people from Fez, Atlas villagers, Christian from Europe, Holland, Britain, and Iberian Catholics who had a sector of their own. Muslims also had a large presence in the Mellah. The Mellah did not isolate Jews but facilitated their interactions with the sultan and his entourage, the Muslims of Marrakesh, and with Jews and Muslims residing in the surrounding region.

In their co-authored book, "The Malleh - Father's home in Marrakesh", Roeeme and Bar Cochba write, "what, in essence, is the Mellah? Some describe it as a 'ghetto', and some describe it as a 'Jewish quarter'. Those of my generation, and myself, can testify that it was a "greenhouse", a place where no foreigner could bother us when we played in the street or when we walked to school. A kind of well protected 'womb' where our parents were waiting for us, the children in homes that were

warmed with love” (Roehme and Bar Cochba, 2006, 15) These kinds of descriptions are familiar to me, from my father’s house, and are repeated in many conversations with acquaintances, uncles and aunts, of positive childhood memories, innocent, full, and embracing.



*The mellah alleys of Marrakesh (© Gil Kenan)*

In 2015, I traveled to Morocco with my father and mother and all my siblings, for a “journey of roots”. In the past, tens of thousands of Jews lived in the Mellah, today there are about ten Jewish families. In the past the Mellah was conserved and clean, today the streets of the Mellah are narrow and neglected and the homes are extremely densely situated. The streets that once bore Hebrew names, now bear new names that don’t hint at the area’s Jewish history. But, even still, in 2015, many locals knew the Hebrew Street names.

We are walking along the road of Torah on our path to the “Lo Azama” Synagogue (the synagogue of the exiled) that is 500 years old and is the only surviving synagogue of the many that were here in the past. We pass through the iron gate from the narrow alley with its red walls, to a new and unexpected space: a large, clean, and bright courtyard, with walls painted white and blue, surrounded all the way around with rooms, leading to the synagogue. In the past, there was in the courtyard of the synagogue a large yeshiva. Thousands of students came to study and live in this complex. The Morning Prayer was held 5 times. The yeshiva no longer exists and in the rooms that once housed the students, now live the few elderlies that the community support. A minyan still assembles one in a while for prayer, safeguarding the embers of its glorious past. An even more exciting moment was the walk in the streets of the Mellah, between the narrow alleyways, on the way to my father’s house. There he passed his childhood until the age of 15. My father feels

totally at home, going first with a wide grin on his face, on steady feet, talking and joking with the passersby on the way to the house and place of business of his father (my grandfather) who was a merchant and owned a truck. The surviving yard of the packaging factory that exists is used today as private residential housing. (Kenan, 2015)<sup>3</sup>



In the alleys in front of my father's childhood home - Mallah Marrakesh (© Gil Kenan)

Shosh Roeme adds:

Many entrances and exits to our Mellah from the outside world, were bustling with Muslims, Christians, or members of Jewish families based relative to us. (...) At every entrance to the Jewish quarter was a heavy door that locked from the inside with a giant latch, taking on different and strange forms with all the movement of the comings and goings, and lessening as it grew dark.

I loved to debate, at length, the Muslim guard on my way, who could guess when and how the Jews were preparing to leave their homes and immigrate to Israel. (Roeme and Bar Cochba, 2006)

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<sup>3</sup> from the journal I kept on the journey of our roots in Morocco 2015



The synagogue in Mallah Marrakesh (the only one still active today) (© Gil Kenan)

### ***The immigration to Israel***

By the first years of the 20th century, Jews began a steady exodus from the Marrakesh Mellah to France and to North America and Israel. At the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, there lived in Morocco, close to a quarter of a million Jews, but three main waves of exodus emptied it almost entirely of Jews. Some of them immigrated to Europe, mainly France, others moved to United States or Canada, but the majority of Moroccan Jewry chose to immigrate to Israel (Bashan, 2000).

### **The first wave (1948 - 1956)**

The complicated and traumatic history of migration to Israel began after the first waves of economic emigration to Latin America. Thousands of Jews began to leave Morocco illegally with the help of Israeli security services following the bloody incidents in Jerada and Oujda in 1948. This was the first wave of emigration to Israel, one that Moroccan Jews and Muslims remember as full of tragic moments.

From the day the State of Israel was established in 1948 until Morocco declared its independence in 1956, 85,623 Jews immigrated to Israel from Morocco (Bashan, 2000)". In November of 1951 the Israeli government and Jewish Agency decided to institute a selection policy for the Jews of Tunisia and Morocco that allowed only for the immigration of families that could be self-sufficient in Israel. On behalf of the Israeli Health Ministry, doctors were sent to those countries to implement the selection policy. In 1955, with the declaration of independence in Morocco and the threat hovering over its Jewish population, the Jewish Agency allowed 3,000 immigrants from Morocco per month to enter Israel, and the selection policy criteria was fulfilled.

### **The second wave (1956-1961)**

In March of 1956, immigration of Moroccan Jews to Israel was prohibited, and in September of 1956, the "Misgeret" (a Jewish underground organization), began organizing the secret immigration of Moroccan Jews. The most traumatic event of this time-period being the tragedy of the illegal immigrant ship the "Egoz", that sank on its voyage, on the night of January 10, 1961. On board were 43 immigrants and Chaim Tsarfati from the "Mossad".

### **The third wave (1961 - 1964)**

The third wave of emigration took place in 1961 when king Mohammed V allow Jews to leave under collective passports. From then till 1964, 97,005 Jews left Morocco with the tacit agreement of the Moroccan authorities. Under this agreement, Israel paid \$ 50 for each immigrant. Since the establishment of the State of Israel until today, close to a quarter of a million Jews have immigrated from Morocco, the largest number of Jews who immigrated from a Muslim country (Cardeira da Silva, 2018).

### **Dispersal of Moroccan and Marrakesh Jews in the periphery of Israel**

The Moroccan Jews were asked to settle in the newborn state of Israel, in areas along the border from where there, in some way, 'co-ethnic' Palestinian Arabs had been expelled. This was just one of the many factors that contributed towards their discontent with the conditions of their reception in Israel. This made integration difficult, thereby increasing their part in Israel's ethnic problem and demographic anxiety. If when in Morocco, these Jews had belonged to the largest Jewish community in an Arab State, in Israel they joined the largest group of oriental Jews (Mizrahim), Middle - Eastern or Arabs, facing the dominant group of the Ashkenazim (Cardeira da Silva, 2018).

In the beginning years of the establishment of the State of Israel, there was a "dispersal of the population", a significant portion of the Moroccan immigrants established settlements of agricultural nature, along the length of Israel's borders and in peripheral areas. The name given to this immigrant absorption policy was "From the Ship to the Village" and its main objective was peripheral settlement. According to the Israeli government, the dispersal of the immigrants throughout Israel, was a solution and an opportunity to realize the population dispersal plan. In the beginning, the immigrants were housed in the abandoned houses of the Arabs, and afterward in transition camps. The population dispersal policy, which was

intended to prevent a concentration of settlers in the center of Israel, relied on the dependence of the new immigrants on government and Agency resources. The Jews of North Africa, that seemed compatible with peripheral settlement, were sent there without a choice. An efficient absorption apparatus enabled organizers to bring immigrants, on the day of their arrival to Israel, to their permanent places of residence in faraway villages. While a small portion of immigrants came with an agricultural background from Morocco, the majority were accustomed to an urban lifestyle and had trouble in adjusting to an agricultural one. Dependency prevented them from leaving, and when the goal of population dispersal was achieved the level of investment in the periphery dropped. The immigrants of Morocco established 111 settlements in The Negev, The Galil, and throughout the land of Israel, and some of these settlements were defensive human barriers that strengthened the northern and southern borders of the state. Moroccan immigrant settlement towns expanded, became soundly established, and were model communities: Dimona, Yavneh, Kiryat Gat, Ofakim, Sderot, Beit Shean, and more. If, in their original land, Jewish Moroccans suffered due to their connection to Zionism, in Israel, they suffered due to the unique culture they brought with them, which was different from the dominant Eastern-European culture in Israel.

### **Preserving and representing the Moroccan Jewish Heritage**

*"We are not the generation that dried up the swamps and 'made the wasteland flourish', but we are the generation that restored the past to relevancy. This was one of the burdens we carried on our shoulders" (Levi, 2013, 10).*

As a background to the cultural struggle of Moroccan Judaism in preserving their heritage, it is important to note the marginality of Judaism of Arab/Islamic countries in the Israel/Zionist narrative. The official perception in Israel of the "ingathering of the exiles", or "the melting pot" presented a unifying image of Jewish identity, based on Eastern European model. This approach stigmatized Jewish cultural denominations of the east as primitive image of Judaism, with the need to sterilize from the root, to prevent the "Levantinization" of the new state. It was necessary to wait until the beginning of the 60's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to make way for a culture of pluralization, one that was tolerant of each sect's autonomy and legitimized its heritage and uniqueness.

In recent decades, progress has been underway in Israel, in which society is searching for its roots and heritage: educational programs encourage students to

research their history and heritage; The Museum of The Jewish People at Beit HaTfutsot was renovated, and it seems that new voices are finding expression there. Dozens of private organizations are emerging with the goal of safeguarding legacies and supporting the diverse Jewish communities, and institutions of academic research are being founded to further research in this field. There are also practical suggestions for the individual, encouraging continued work in this direction: a search for and concentration of existing information, the building of a family tree, the collecting of family photos from the past etc.

From this perspective, much importance is acknowledged in the founding of "The Alliance of The Moroccan Exodus" on October 23, 1967, in Sderot. The movement charter emphasized, among other things, the conservation of Moroccan Jewish heritage: "to conserve, to promote, and to promulgate cultural values and the historical legacy of Moroccan Jewry, and to highlight its contributions to Israeli society. (Asraf, 2008, p. 12). The international "Institute for the Research of Moroccan Jewry" was established and set up as its central goals, the advancement of interdisciplinary research, and a development of an awareness of a two-thousand-year history. The establishment of "the seat of Moroccan and Moroccan Jewish history, named after Robert and Michelle Asraf" was another steppingstone in the advancement of the cultural standing of the Moroccan Jewish community. Simultaneously, initiatives arose to save from oblivion, hundreds of the books which Moroccan Rabbis from previous centuries couldn't publish, as well as the renewed

## Moroccan Jewish Associations and Heritage Centers in Israel



A painting on display in an exhibition by Elisha Sheerit, "Pictures of Jewish Life in Morocco." At the Museum of Jewish Art, Ramat Gan, 2005 The artist became acquainted with Moroccan Jewry and its culture during a research project she did on the Jewish community in Marrakesh.

Heritage centers are an exemplar of the mutual dependence between heritage and history while combining 'history's universality with heritage's possessive intimacy' (Edson 2004; Waterton and Watson 2010). Most of the heritage centers in Israel take on the complementary roles of a traditional exhibit-based museum and a community institution. They curate the stories of local personalities, heroes, and the settings of events that frame regional history. Preserving the unique objects of daily life and presenting heritage narratives to visitors are some of the everyday practices taken on at these sites. Heritage narratives and material traces can serve not only as 'authentic' representations of the past, but as active players in heritage experiences. The late 1970s and early 1980s Israel witnessed a sort of Mizrahim counter-acculturation and to pressure from historically marginalized groups for greater visibility for their histories (Stevens, Flinn and Shepherd, 2010), and to emergence of different ethnic museums and associations, and heritage centers of communities from various ethnic and diasporic origin (Trevisan Semi, Miccoli, and Parfitt 2013). Most of the communal museums displayed a sense of urgency for the preservation and commemoration of their community's history before and after immigration to Israel. In all cases the associations or the heritage centers that were founded declared their intention to utilize the centers for the preservation of the identities of these communities, but they also affirmed that their aim was to give their community a 'proper place in the pages of history'.

### **The Marrakesh Jewish Association in Israel**



Examples of conferences' invitations over the years.

I became acquainted with this organization as part of the routine lifestyle in my parents' home while I was still a child. All the years of my childhood I remember the many conversations my father held with people about unity of the Jewish community of Marrakesh and I remember being greatly occupied with all matters of life in this organization, including community and cultural meetings, journalistic meetings, and conferences. I remember especially, the lively traffic in the house and the many goings-on in anticipation of the Tishrei holidays, particularly, the festival of Sukkot, when the yearly unity conventions were held.

Activity began, as my father told it, with the collecting of friends and names of friends from the immigrants of Marrakesh, and the planning of the first conference, which took place in the fall of 1985 (the Sukkot festival) which was a great success. Following this initial success, the conferences became the central annual event for the community. The first conventions were held in Park HaYarkon, Tel Aviv (up until the tenth convention) and afterward the conventions migrated throughout the country to different cities; Yavneh, Ashkelon, Yokneam, and in recent years, Ashdod.



In an interview I had with my father, he explained that the idea to establish this organization and community goes back to Marseille, France in the early 1980's:

During the period that I was in Paris, and I sat with one of my friends who established the Jews of Marrakesh in Paris branch. He is from Marrakesh (...). We played together on the Jewish soccer team in Marrakesh. We sat and talked, and I invited some friends, one of them was my friend, Ori Sabag, who was a member of the Knesset and a leader of the community in Be'er Sheva. We decided to establish an organization of Jews from

Marrakesh in Israel. That was in the early 80's. (...) It is amazing to think that today we are celebrating 40 years of the alliance of the Jews of Marrakesh. (...)

Afterward, I gathered a group of 15 friends, and we began establishing institutions. Managerial boards, secretariat, cultural committees, organizing committees, branch committees. (...) I knew the city secretary of Tel Aviv, in the days of 'Cheech', Shmulik Levy, and Ilan Moeal and I came together, and I presented the subject to him, and we got permission from him to hold the first convention in Park HaYarkon. (...) A few hundred people came to the first convention. There we started to keep an organized record of community members. Advertising, in those days, was achieved through letters and the searching out of family addresses. We divided the state amongst ourselves by towns; Be'er Sheva, Haifa, Yerucham, Netivot, Sderot, Ashkelon, Kiryat Gat, Netanya, Krayot, Hatzor HaGlilit, Kiryat Shemona, Tiberius. Wherever there were representatives, we passed out fliers in Synagogues and post offices.

At the latest conference that was held in Ashdod in 2019, my father briefly described, in the opening words, the idea and initiative for the establishment of the organization "Marrakesh Immigrants' Association". Here is a report of some of my father words, David Vaknin Kenan words at the above-mentioned convention, number 37:

With the 37th year of the Marrakesh Immigrants' Association, I am honored to outline here the story of its establishment and activities since 1982. Organization began with the actions of a handful of people. The goal was to maintain communication between us and to safeguard the heritage and glorious, rich traditions that were characterized our communal activities and meetings, by mutual support etc. (...) The hope was to bequeath this heritage to future generations of Marrakesh immigrants. A legacy of memories from the city's yeshivot and Rabbis, from the Synagogues, of songs and poems, of the school 'Alliance' and its administrators and educators, from the youth groups, from the kindergartens and their songs, and in general, of the life of our community, inside the Mellah walls and out. All this and more, is saved in our memories and in their light, we inaugurated the first convention

on the Festival of Sukkot of 1985 in Ganei Yehoshua-Park HaYarkon (...). Many immigrants of Marrakesh participated, coming from towns, e villages and kibbutzim throughout the country. The meeting was extremely exciting, it turned into a celebration of the realization of the Zionist dream of the Jewish community of Marrakesh, which its thinkers and rabbis and sages called 'little Jerusalem'. It was a unique event, the reunion of friends who hadn't seen each other in many years. The reunion of educators and teachers with their former students, neighbors from the same buildings and streets. It was bursts of waves of indescribable happiness, rejoicing, embracing, the recounting of past experiences in Marrakesh, and of experiences of immigration and absorption into Israel .

From that initial convention until today, the 37th annual conference - the association has become a living and breathing body with activities throughout the country, thanks to the donations and actions of the volunteers heading it. We created and continue to provide community social activities, traditional events, national holidays, evenings of song and poetry, Sabbaths of study, heritage delegations to Morocco and specifically to Marrakesh, and the crowning achievement of all these activities is- our traditional annual conventions in Sukkot, which have become the central event of Marrakesh Jewry in Israel and the Diaspora. (...) Brothers and sisters, dear children of Marrakesh, I find it a sacred duty, with awe and admiration, to bless God that we merited this arrival. Yes, a wonderful duty to bless the dedicated activists that selflessly volunteer and bring to fruition the association as an exemplary and model of social community body that safeguards its unique heritage, grounded in fraternity, and faithful friendship. (...)

With sincere blessings,

David Vaknin Kenan- Chairman of the Association



Speeches delivered by my father at the 10th conference 1995

Mrs. Shosh Roemee (Roemee, 2006) a descendant of Marrakesh and active participant since the founding of the organization wrote about her memories from the gatherings on the Festival of Sukkot, beginning in 1986:

The Sukkot Festival 1986. With excessive feverishness, I prepared together with my friends, descendants of Marrakesh, living in Dimona, for our first meeting with the Marrakesh Immigrants' Association, headed by David Vaknin, in Park Yehoshua in Tel Aviv.

In my mind's eye, I imagine the reunion with my childhood friends, neighbors, the butcher, the ritual circumcisor, the shoemaker, the teachers, the principal, kindergarten teachers. Our bus leaves Dimona at 9 am, in the direction of Tel Aviv. It crawls too slowly in the opinions of all my friends who are sitting behind and next to me [...] As the bus moves away from Dimona, his honor the Rabbi, Mr. David Turgeman prays with great emotion the Traveler's Prayer. After the prayer, a tense silence on the bus prevailed. None of us can imagine how many of our friends will come to the meeting, if any. There is a certain tenseness in the air. We are all wondering, smiling, breaking out in spontaneous laughter, but again quiet. On all sides, jokes are heard, and after them, songs, and recitations from our distant childhood in Marrakes .

As we get closer to our destination, shouts of joy break out from all around. [...] The driver looks too slowly for a parking space. Our necks are tense with pain. Our eyes searching to recognize. Shouts of joy [...] everyone recognizes this one and that one [...] everyone pushing to get through the doors of the bus that are refusing to open and to let us rush outside and hug our dear ones. Everyone around us is laughing, crying, excited, sighing. From the distant stage, childhood songs are hatching. Everyone is experiencing happiness mixed with sadness. [...] Everyone who had once planned to immigrate together to Israel and to continue to build their futures together, found themselves face to face, mouths wide, cheeks washed with tears.

The first conference brought after it many others, for the next 40 years at least. As the years passed, the number of members grew. Our children and grandchildren joined and looked forward to them, enjoying their parents dancing around from joy and happiness.

**The 10th Conference of The Marrakesh Jewish Association in Israel  
, Hayarkon Park, Tel Aviv, 1995**

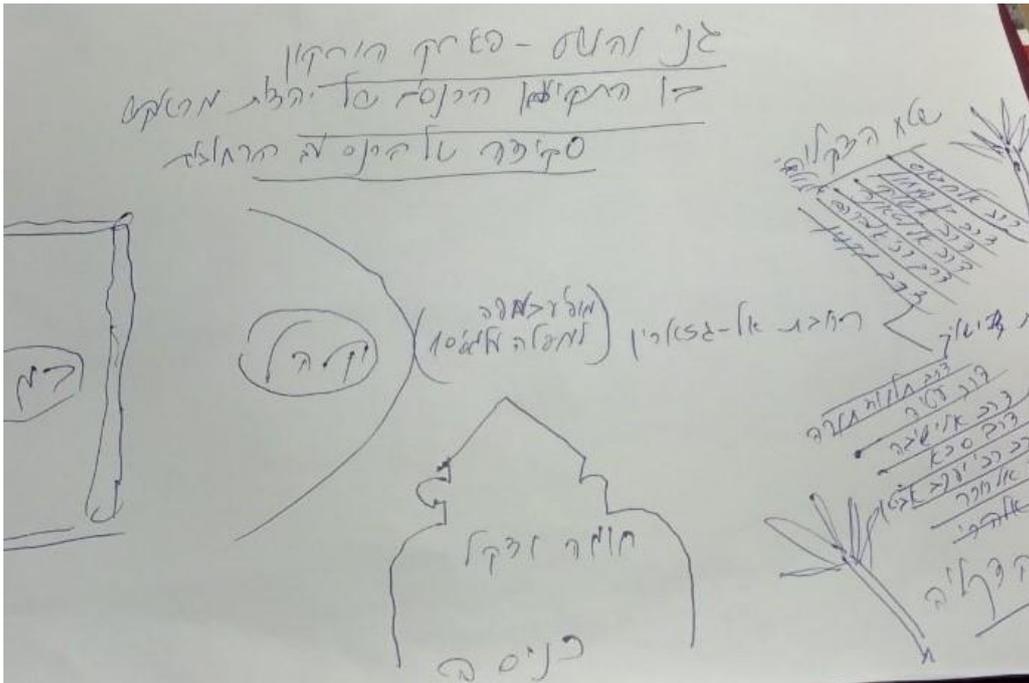


(© Gil Kenan)

The main annual event of the "The Marrakesh Jewish Association in Israel" is the yearly conference held every year on the Sukkot festival. The location of the conferences in the first years of the creation of the organization were in Gan Yehoshua-Park HaYarkon, sponsored by the city of Tel Aviv. Later, the conferences were hosted by different places around Israel, mostly - Ashdod, Ashkelon, Yavneh, and Yokneam Ilit. These conferences, especially, the tenth conference held in 1995, were experienced by the participants as a return to their heritage, to their childhood, to their neighborhood, language, the scents, and colors- to "father's house"!

One of the conferences of importance to the legacy of the organization was the 10<sup>th</sup> convention, in which, the organizers, and at their head, my father, the chairman of the organization, held a celebratory convention in honor of a decade of the existence of the organization. The idea was to gather and convene for a small "journey in time" of a return to the neighborhood, the streets, to the houses in which they grew up, to the home of the Mellah in Marrakesh. They called this event "Journey to Our Past in Marrakesh". At the 10<sup>th</sup> convention, members, and their families, convened in undergoing a return to the experience of the Mellah. They were requested to find anew their places of residence amidst the streets of the imaginary Mellah, which was represented in a model that was built around the avenue of characterizing palm trees in park HaYarkon and the entrance gate built around the trees.

This necessitated some research in reconstructing the map of the Mellah and the names of streets to their original names, etc. The map of the Mellah was reproduced from those years and a small model was prepared as an attempt to reproduce the streets of the Mellah (see the map and model below). The model was implemented amongst the palm trees in Park HaYarkon, where the avenues of palms paralleled the street names of the Mellah. At the entrance, the main gate of the park represented the main gate through which, entered the inhabitants of the Mellah, in Marrakesh. The participants were requested to find the road where they once lived, and there, they reunited with their childhood friends, the neighbor across the street, their friend or their friend's brother.



A sketch of the Mellah street plans from the 10<sup>th</sup> convention, Park HaYarkon 1995.

This is how my father described it:

The main feature we had for the decade celebrations, was to reconstruct the Mellah and its streets, in Park HaYarkon. A film was produced to document the event. Since Marrakesh was known as the city of dates and palm trees, and Park HaYarkon is full of palm trees (that don't bear fruit), we decided that every row of these trees would be named for a street, while the gate at the entrance to the park resembled the original Moroccan gate of the Mellah. This way, everyone that came entered their own street and every row was labeled with a hanging sign with the name of the street in the Mellah. And then [...] the embracing, the kisses, the excitement. For an instant we were once again, those same children that met their neighbors, their teachers, and their old friends. Because since the immigration to Israel, most of the connections were severed.

Mrs. Shosh Roemie wrote about the journey to the past and the bringing back to life of the streets of the Mellah at the 10<sup>th</sup> conference:

In Park Yehoshua in Tel Aviv there are planted palm trees like those we left in Marrakesh. We reimagined those small stores and asked their owners to take their places as if they had never left them. With eyes shining with happiness, the sphinge seller fried golden doughnuts, their scent wafting, and found himself surrounded by the men and women

that went back in time and transformed for a moment back into playful youths. They laughed out loud, baring teeth that were once white. (Roemee, 2006)

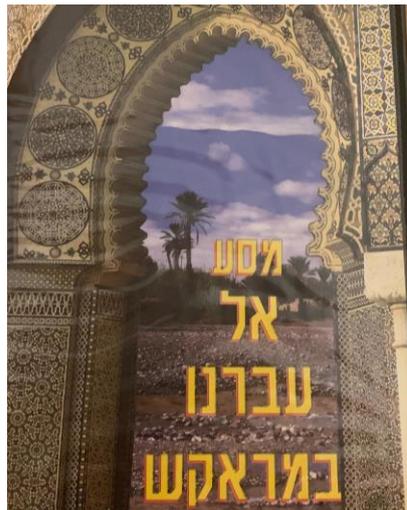
The goal of the organizers was to bring to life the streets and the daily, communal life of those streets:

The cloth seller was asked to bring with him colorful fabrics decorated with flowers and polka dots. (...) the legumes seller recited the names of the spices and their healing properties. This soothes belly aches, and this soothes tooth aches. This is the Suak plant, which whitens teeth, and to our astonishment, from a clay vessel, was drawn a black paste that was used as vegan shampoo. The water seller (el grab) moved among his friends, pouring filtered water into copper cups. Dressed in a colorful red robe decorated with colorful bells, atop his head, sat a cone shaped fez, and at its tip a colorful cotton ball, which he spun with surprising artfulness, for the adoring eyes of the crowd. Another water seller passed out tea with peppermint (Roemee, 2006).

After the abovementioned conference, a film was produced documenting the exciting conferences, as well as a pamphlet in which it was endeavored to describe, restore, and invigorate memories of life in the Mellah of Marrakesh. As it was written in the pamphlet's introduction:

On a decade of the Marrakesh Immigrants' Association, is presented this modest pamphlet, a revelatory expression of the experience of Jewish life in the Mellah of Marrakesh. The distinctiveness of the immigrants from Marrakesh in Israel and in the Diaspora is imperative for us to perpetuate as well as to maintain the contact between members despite their dispersal throughout Israel and despite leaving many years ago (...) The urge to maintain contact arises from the desire of the people to preserve the rich legacy of their community and the hope of passing it on to future generations.

These things testify more than anything mentioned, about the urge to do and to act for preservation of heritage, the deep need to preserve a connection to the past and memories, especially, the profound idea implied in "know where you came from and where you are going" (Mishna, Avot a-c). These constitute the main motivation of this blessed activity, and on a personal note, also inspired me to write this work.



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Cover photos of the pamphlet and the film which were produced for the 10<sup>th</sup> conference

## **From the Mellah in Marrakech to Israel and back ...**

The research journey pursuant of my father's actions to preserve our heritage and to build the community, led me to make a visual reproduction, geographically and chronologically, of the journey made by immigrants from Marrakesh. I created 3 maps, at 3 points in time, of 15 families. Maps of life in Marrakesh, in the Mellah, the distribution throughout Israel of the immigrants, and the "reunion" with the 10<sup>th</sup> conference in Park HaYarkon. These three points clearly illustrate the physical and conceptual distance of community members from the city of their birth.

### **Map 1 - map of life in the Mellah in Marrakesh - 1945-1965.**

The first map is a map of the Mellah in 1945, including noted central places; businesses, synagogues, public buildings, and streets named as they were in those days (see below). On this map is indicated, the names of 15 families, members of the community of the Marrakesh Immigrants' Association, and their addresses before their immigration to Israel.

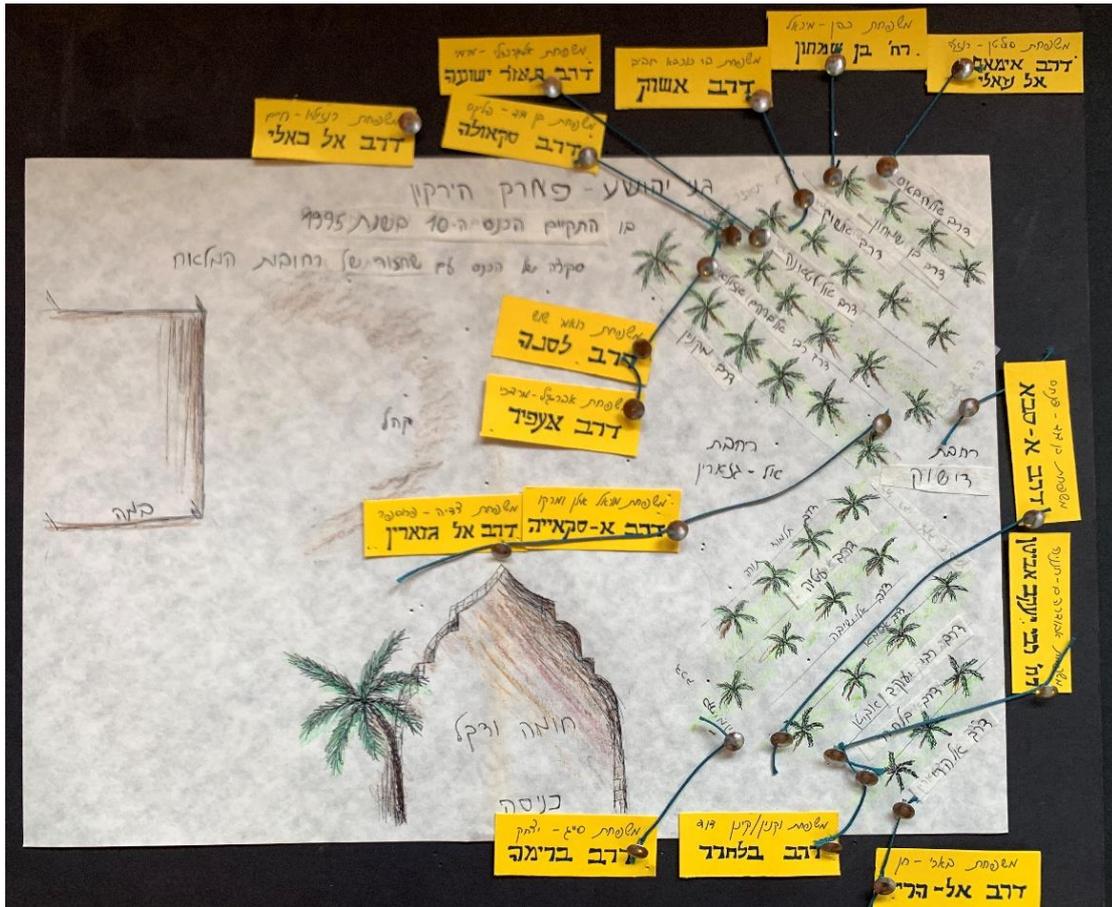


(© Gil Kenan)

**Map 2 - map of the distribution of the Jews from Marrakesh - 1948-1956.**

The second map is a map of the Land of Israel, marking the localities in which Marrakesh immigrants settled and settled in the 1950s. The map marks the geographical distribution, and the distance from the same closeness and sense of community in which the same families lived along these streets in the mellach of Marrakech.





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\*Not all the streets of the Mellah are represented in the reproduction, therefore some of the original addresses of the families are shown on the map in proximity to the original street on which they lived.

### Concentrated sample of 15 families of the The Marrakesh Jewish Association in Israel

המשפחות -	הכתובת במלח - רח'	ישוב העלייה בא"י
1 משפ' וקבין/קינן דוד	דרב בלחרר	אשקלון
2 משפ' בר כוכבא - חביב	דרב אשוק	מושבת עמינדב
3 משפ' מויאל אילן ומרקו	דרב א-סקאיה	בני ברק
4 משפ' רואמי - שוש	דרב לסנה	דימונה
5 משפ' בן דוד - פליקס	דרב סקאולה	נתניה
6 משפ' סייג- יצחק	דרב ברימה	קריות
7 משפ' רוזיליו- חיים	דרב אל כאלי	בת ים
8 משפ' כהן - מיכאל	רח' בן שמחון	קריית גת
9 משפ' אבודרהם- חנניה	רח' רבי יעקב אביטן	פתח תקווה
10 משפ' צדיה- פרוספר	דרב אל גזארין	בית שאן
11 משפ' סולטן - רוזה	דרב אימאם אל זאלי	ירושלים

12	משפ' בן דוד – פנחס	דרב א- סבא	יבנה
13	משפ' אברג'ל – מרדכי	דרב אעפיה	קרית טבעון
14	משפ' בארי – חן	דרב אל-הרי	דימונה
15	משפ' אלגרביילי-מימי	דרב תאז'ר ישועה	קריית ים

In the table shown here, a sample of 15 families who are members of the community, is visible. They are central figures in the community of the Association. The table is divided into the following categories: family name, address in the Mellah, and the village to which they arrived after immigration. Most of the families immigrated in the first big wave from Morocco with the creation of the State of Israel from 1948-1956.

These three maps and the table are a visual representation of the chronological and geographical migration of which is the topic of this research. It is interesting to note on inspection of the maps, how close the physical proximity of the inhabitants in the tiny Mellah of Marrakesh was, and how wide the dispersal with immigration to Israel. The physical distance, in most cases, transpired to a mental distance and disconnection, that is, until the moment of joining the foundation of unity for the community, and specifically the convention at which many of these reunions happened for the first time.

The immigration movement is visualized by color in the family table. The color variation in the table represents the physical proximity of community members when living in the Mellah in Marrakesh. The families that lived closest to each other are represented in the same color, contrasting with the geographical distance between them after immigration to Israel. The 15 families mentioned above represent the general distance of community members gauged about 3000 community members. Without this organization and these meetings, it seems, they wouldn't have ever reconvened and therefore, would have lost their connection to themselves and to their heritage and more generally, this unique community might never have reunited and been reborn at all.

### **Epilogue - On Community and Heritage Community**

"The origin of congregation, tribe, public organized assembly is defined in 'the Torah that Moses commanded us, is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob'.

Scientific research is brimming with studies and articles on the topic of community, doubtless this plentitude of writings testifies to the importance of this concept in

societal life in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Community is a whole, it's a social unit, a framework in which people participate to have influence and realize economic, political, social, and emotional interests. According to Bauman the concept expresses the yearning of people to acquire security in an insecure world, while Claire Friedman, and Thomas claim that people are hungry for material resources as well as fulfilling and rewarding relationships. (Sadan2009) Characterizing this concept is shared geographic location as well as functioning or organizing around the basis of a critical commonality (Sadan1997). Friendship, integration, influence, and the fulfillment of needs and spiritual connectivity - which has transcendence beyond the daily life between community members and is created from sharing the feelings that people experience on a continual basis, are 4 dimensions that express the sense of belonging, mutual care, and shared faith that needs will be met through mutual commitment and reciprocity.

According to Sedan (2009, 170): Community organization is a process in which the community identifies its needs and goals, decides between each other on prioritization, and develops a sense of self confidence and the determination to act in the interest of these needs and goals. It finds the resources- internal and/or external- to handle them, acts regarding them, meanwhile expanding and developing the position and actions of cooperation and collaboration

Friedman (1990) relates the concept, "level of community" as relevant to the level of interest and participation of people in its educational and social activities. The assumption is that a population with a high level of community, will be willing to participate in activities and contribute at a higher level than populations with a lower level of community. Based on the work of Tonyas and researchers of the process of urbanization (in Friedman, 1990) we can describe the level of community of populations in a particular geographical location, by how close and lasting the relationships are between the inhabitants living in the area, how they empathize with each other, and feel that they have ideological and ethical mutuality. These people would be defined as having a high level of community; people with positive interpersonal relationships with each other, sharing mutual ideological and social aspirations, engaging in activities that express a mutual dependence on social programs and a common public (Friedman, 1990)

This research, definitions, and characteristics outlining the concept of community are interesting with regards to this present work and to my father's experience of erecting a heritage organization related to immigrants and all the challenges and

problems facing them. It seems that one of the motives of the organization's establishment was to return the community to a "high level of community" as defined by Friedman, this is despite and even with the geographical distance. And in fact, closeness was achieved here despite the distance. The closeness that existed in the past in the country and neighborhood of origin in the Mellah of Marrakesh was restored symbolically in the expansive activities of the organization, "the community of Jews from Marrakesh in Israel" and specifically at the 10<sup>th</sup> convention, in which the neighborhood, geographical proximity, and community experienced in the Mellah of Marrakesh was replicated. For a moment, almost ceremoniously, descendants of the same Jews that lived an intensive communal life in the Mellah of Marrakesh met for the first time in 60 years, meeting again their acquaintances and creating community anew, based on those past connections, yet a renewed community by choice and by necessity, as expressed in the words of David Kenan, founder of the Organization of Jews of Marrakesh in Israel:

The drive was and is to preserve the connection between us and to preserve the wonderful and rich heritage and traditions that are characterized in the activities of the community, the social gatherings, mutual support, etc [...] in the hopes of bequeathing this legacy to the coming generations of the children of Marrakesh.

Rudolf Steiner wrote prolifically about community and among other things, said: "the building of community [...] is a product of deep and primal emotion that is found among many of humanity's souls today, a product of the feeling of clear and defined relationship between people, and every impulse calling for mutual action" (Steiner, 1923, pg. 124). Steiner saw in community a vision of health and worked hard to realize his social ethics. He formulated the essence of his social motto in one sentence that comprises within it "the whole Torah on one foot": "healing will be found only when man's soul mirrors the entire community, and in the community lives the power of the individual" (Ibid). I choose to conjure the words of Steiner about the need to build community and it's bringing healing to man's soul, also in the context of building communities of heritage that brings healing to people, for example, the community of immigrants from Marrakesh, as a continuation of the struggle to preserve the heritage and build community that my father worked for. There isn't anything more wonderful and more practical than the story of the building of the community of Jews from Marrakesh, the triumph of their society and spirit despite the distance and difficulties.

When my father had the idea to build a model of the Mellah at that convention, and requested participants find “anew” the addresses of their homes, to meet their neighbors from long ago, in practice he was striving to return to the heritage of his fathers, to return to his roots, vicariously, through the shared memories, by way of the fluent language in the mouths of every participant, through that gathering of renewal. In the action of reconstructing the streets of the Mellah in the heart of Tel Aviv, my father resurrected a renewed experience of his childhood, innocent, whole, secure, and embracing- cocooned in the Mellah of Marrakesh. Not for nothing is the name of the organization- the Marrakesh Immigrants’ Association. The desired goal is to create unity, a renewed unity of the human treasure trove that is abundant and dispersed everywhere. And from within that unity, that convergence, derive strength and pride in the glorious heritage of Marrakesh and Morocco as a whole.

As someone that has been engaged in Waldorf education for 20 years and dedicates many resources to the creation of school and classroom community and is aware of the deep and innate human value of and need for it, I was excited to rediscover, the blessed 40-year actions of my father, in the creation and cultivation of community, from amidst dispersal, of the Jews of Marrakesh. I am present, as proof of life, of how heritage is passed down in a family, and the recognition of the great importance and value of unity and human closeness lives in my father and in the inheritance for generations, and in me.

In this framework and through my students, I was successful in reproducing my life and my childhood from amongst the walls of the Jewish quarter from 1948 -1963 until my Aliyah at the age of 15. [...] 20 years after my Aliyah to Israel with my family [...] I discerned a certain awakening among part of my generation, that left in the darkness of night throughout the years of the 1960’s. With the awakening, nostalgia surfaced for our innocent childhoods that we had abandoned and that we thought we had forgotten forever. Fervently, I created connections with friends which brought about more, and a year didn’t pass until we found ourselves, as young children, surrounding Mr. David Vaknin who in the past was an immigration agent in Marrakesh, and became an encourager of the first meeting on the festival of Sukkot that brought after it many more meetings for almost 40 years. [...] Together with my classmates, I recreated our home inside the Jewish Mellah and with the

help of my friends the unity that began with a class became a kingdom with the years.



Marakesh market, (© Gil Kenan)

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