

Yaëlle Azagury
A JEWISH MOROCCAN CHILDHOOD

Morocco 2007 English

This excerpt comes from an unpublished memoir about growing up in that once thriving, now almost extinct community. Azagury reflects on the malaise of a generation of Moroccan Jews who were born after Morocco achieved its independence in 1956, and who experienced a sense of disorientation and displacement; while they felt somewhat disconnected from Morocco, they also never fully embraced the Western countries to which most eventually emigrated. Her narrative takes its place amid the literature of Jewish exile and diaspora, reaching out to questions

about the self, about “home,” even to questions about the very notion of a native language. She attempts to construct a self-narrative that moves back and forth between stability and fluidity, striving to feed one out of the other.

Moha Ennaji



I grew up in Tangier, in the luscious landscapes of northern Morocco where the implacable African sun becomes softer, more humane, and the dry vegetation of southern latitudes slowly gives way to amazingly green forests—almost like an anachronism. It is a magical kingdom where palm trees cede ground to deliciously smelling pines, where two continents—Europe and Africa—stare at each other, where East flirts with West. Surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, Tangier has been shaped by many cultures, religions, and dreams, but until recently, none of these influences has ever been dominant.

Morocco was partially under French rule from 1912 to 1956. The north was given to Spain, but Tangier became an international city with an astonishingly long list of identities and nationalities. Jews, who were an important presence, had somehow peacefully lived side-by-side with Muslims and Christians for generations. In fact, Tangier is among the few cities in Morocco where a *mellah*, or Jewish quarter, did not exist, which doesn't mean that Jews had assimilated. Rather, they were more open to the multiple influences to which they were exposed. Tangier Jews, for instance, considered themselves descendants of Jews who fled Spain during the Inquisition in the fifteenth century, with well-known family names such as the Toledano, the Laredo, or the Marques. They had set themselves apart from indigenous Jews—the Toshavim—who had allegedly been in Morocco since the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem. In some regions of the Atlas Mountains, Jews lived so close to traditional Arab tribes that one could hardly tell the difference: They looked like Arabs, spoke only Arabic, and possessed a limited awareness of the modern world. They were Berber Jews—either the descendants of Berber tribes who had been converted to Judaism, or, on the contrary, Jews who had slowly undergone Berber influence, who descended from the Toshavim and must be counted among the first inhabitants of Morocco. In contrast, the Megorashim—the exiles, i.e. the descendants of the Spaniards—enjoyed an allegedly “higher” culture inherited from Spanish courts. The divide between Toshavim and Megorashim started in the sixteenth century, but according to historians, the differences slowly became meaningless as the two groups merged.

Yet the ideology remained, and I like to think of my family's history—and mine as well—as hybrid, a blend between Toshavim and Megorashim. On my mother's side, I come from the well-known Toledano family, which can be traced back to Toledo, Spain, in the fifteenth century, and to Rabbi Daniel Toledano, a learned man who was respected by the Castilian Jewry. My grandmother, Señora Ana or *Mamita* Anita was a woman of fair skin and impeccable

bearing. My grandfather, Aaron Cohen, was also a descendant of Spanish Jews, but from less glorious extraction. His grandfather had traded animal horns bought in Africa and sold in Europe, but attracted by the North's growing prosperity had left Meknes, the imperial capital of Morocco where he had lived as part of a large Jewish community, and set out to Tangier on a donkey with his two young sons, Samuel and Abraham, on either side of his saddle. In Tangier, Samuel's eldest son, Aaron, started a small business trading flour and other commodities in the early years of the twentieth century, and soon managed, with the help of his younger brother Jacob, to build a decent fortune for the time. His funeral, in 1964, which coincided with the end of Tangier's golden era, was attended not only by Jews but also by a massive crowd of Muslims and Christians, which was extremely rare.

My father's family, although already an established family in Rabat by the fifties, descended from the Berbers, or Arab Jews, as they often call themselves. My last name most likely comes from Zagora, a town on the edge of the Sahara desert, in the most southern part of Morocco.

Before the French Protectorate, Moroccan Jews lived under unpredictable conditions. They paid tax—the *jizya*—to the sultan, who in return granted them political protection. If the goals of the *jizya* were not met, Jews would sometimes fall prey to persecutions or arbitrary hangings. Their situation was thus dependent on the good will of the sultan. In fact, since the beginning of the French Protectorate, Jews benefited from French presence and culture, yet never felt entirely French. The opposite was true in Algeria, which was an official French colony, and where Jews had French passports. But the situation in Morocco had always been more complex. And Tangier was even worse. Imagine being a Jew of Spanish culture, born in a Muslim country, educated in French *lycées* or at the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, your feet strongly rooted on North African soil but your eyes looking toward the West.

Identity seemed, for me, anyway, like a jigsaw puzzle with one piece always missing from the puzzle—a piece that I have spent a great deal of time trying to find. I have always felt I was made of endless crystallization, layers brought by winds and oceans, built through gradual accumulation, and then shattered by landslides collapsing my epicenter. And finally, after the turmoil, it is as though I had been swallowed by seas, and granted a patient reappearance, a delivery in a new shape, as an island or perhaps a volcano. I often meditate on the story of the princess and the pea. I love to read it as a quest for identity, with the pea as the missing part, thinking that there might not be any pea under the mattresses, that the princess is lying on hundreds of layers, with nothing genuine buried beneath, begging to be brought to life.

At home, Tangier Jews spoke Spanish, a language they had been intent on keeping since their ancestors fled Spain in the fifteenth century. Actually, it was rather an old Spanish, mixed with Hebrew and Arab words, which eventually became a language in its own right, called Haquetia. It has a musical rhythm of its own, with syllables drawling at the end of sentences and magical words that I

took as fetishes, with the power to transform reality, or so I believed. When, as a little girl, I broke something—a glass, perhaps, or a dish—and started to cry, fearfully anticipating my mother's anger, I would hear my father articulate the secret word, *kappara*—with the extra power gained from the doubled letter “p” at its very core—a Hebrew word that conveyed a whole range of meanings. It rested first upon a ritualistic view of life whereby literal and symbolic meanings were identical: the broken object was a sacrificial lamb that could absorb like a sponge whatever evil or pain was reserved to someone. Ultimately, and ironically, the incident was actually desirable, since it meant that I had avoided some terrible harm. This mysterious word also emphasizes the vanity of worldly losses, and the need to value the spiritual over the material. Finally, it implied a submission to higher designs, to the fatalistic belief that nothing can be done to fight whatever befalls us—that whatever happens is inevitable—and that the universe is simply a vast interaction between forces upon which humans have no influence.

Other phrases, less powerful than this but no less enchanting, have stuck with me, despite my attempts to even out my language and make it more pure, less heterogeneous. Each time I wore a new piece of clothing, I recall my mother or father always greeting me with the same Spanish words, *con salud*, wishing me to wear it in good health, and the ritualized frequency of those syllables was like a blessing. It was as if clothes possessed a magical power they might confer upon the person wearing them.

The language of my childhood was thus made of words and idioms that framed my everyday life, giving meaning to each event, and I can only wonder now how other people lived without *con salud* or *kappara*. There was a rare and reassuring pleasure in knowing these words would come back with the regularity of an old relative's weekly visit.

Language has always been an important part of my life, although for a long time I felt embarrassed about my mixed tongue—whimsical, impure, and adulterated with various foreign appendices. Our Spanish—or Haquetia—seemed like a reflection on how great we had once been, in Spain, but also a testimony to our decay, like a beautiful statue chipped and full of cracks. When we took our annual trips to Madrid, I was profoundly ashamed of my accent. My inability to pronounce the letters *z* and *c* in proper Castilian fashion identified me publicly as an outsider, an impostor who did not know proper Spanish. It sounded totally out of tune, like a baritone's melody sung by a castrato. It tortured me, that lack of musicality, that shrieking in my own ears. At times I would make the effort to speak with modern Spanish pronunciation, but I felt so conscious about the unnatural attempt that I do not know which felt more appropriate, my colorful Sephardic accent or my contrived Spanish pronunciation. Often, I made every possible effort to avoid words with those cursed letters, but to my utter despair, “thank you” in Spanish contained one of the dreaded consonants. So I was caught between my fear of being ridiculed and the terror of seeming impolite.

We had the habit of mixing our Spanish—which I considered a degenerated

travesty of Cervantes's language—with touches of French, in an attempt to make it more beautiful [mixing Spanish and French is regarded by most people as a bad habit]. I hated speaking that way, but was unable to stop. The results, all too often, were odd sentences that started with a Spanish subject and verb and ended with a French complement. Verbs were sometimes declined in mysterious ways, borrowing prefixes, suffixes, or endings from French grammar. French words were sprinkled randomly into a perfectly Spanish sentence. Our sudden choice of French over Spanish obeyed seemingly arbitrary reasons—sometimes we just did not know the exact modern term—but I am now convinced we unconsciously followed a hidden order. Instinctively, we understood how different languages do not seize reality in the same way; instinctively, we favored the word that was closest to what we needed to say. The result was a sentence built like those odd mythological animals with the head of a lion and the tail of a snake.

We didn't speak Arabic and didn't really want to learn. Arabic was considered unsophisticated and only for Jews from the south or the inner lands, the *forasteros* or "strangers," as we condescendingly called them in Spanish, referring ironically to the Tshavim. In fact, not speaking Arabic was considered the "right thing," since it meant we were more European. Yet, our Spanish was densely populated with Arabic sounds, words and idioms, popping into our sentences like colorful butterflies. For a long time, I recall feeling embarrassed about being able to pronounce the Arabic *haiin* or the *ja* sound, as if that talent only brought me closer to the wild beasts' reign. When, at the age of twenty-five, I took an Arabic class at Harvard, determined suddenly to speak proper *Fusha*, or classical Arabic, our American teacher played a song by the famous Lebanese diva Fairouz. It was beautiful. The teacher ended the class with these simple words: "If you don't like how this sounds, don't bother to come back." Suddenly, my longstanding rejection of Arabic seemed foolish. It was like listening to someone who had borrowed my own voice, that same strange feeling of hearing it for the first time in a tape recorder, or as Rilke would have said, like having the first text you've ever written read by someone else. Perhaps we only own something after a process of estrangement.

Juggling languages has been only one facet of my struggle with shifting identities. I remember the terror I felt when someone asked me where I came from, what nationality I was. Would I say French, or maybe Spanish? But then, I was technically lying. And if I answered Moroccan, the next question would be, "Oh! So you speak Arabic at home?" But that wasn't true either, and I anticipated the endless explanations where, apologetically, I would have to excuse myself for calling up history and my ancestors, who had left Spain in the fifteenth century, and that's-why-we-still-spoke-Spanish-at-home.

Identity, anyway, has always been a tantalizing question for me, probably since I don't look Moroccan. In fact, I grew up feeling I didn't quite belong anywhere. My accent did not sound quite French when I left Morocco to start my degree in French literature in Paris, but that soon changed, and people began to assume I was French.

Yet, even with all my efforts to assimilate, I sometimes got the dreaded French remark, razor-sharp and definitive: "*Vous êtes vraiment typé, vous,*" which translates as, "You *do* look exotic." "*Typé,*" in fact, has the same etymological root as *typical* or *typically*, and should be used with an adjective—one is typically Spanish, or typically Swedish—but in French the meaning has shifted, and it is used alone to designate exclusively the black, Hispanic, or Semitic type. In other words, if someone tells you in France how "*typé*" you look, take it as a decree of excommunication. And the pounding question would come back, leaving me no respite: Who am I? Yaëlle the Frenchwoman or Yael the Jew, the Arab, the Spaniard? From Morocco to France to Cambridge to New York, I felt like a space shuttle gravitating from one planet to the next, striving to understand which is more genuinely my own, searching for an orbit and a sun.

In truth, I was confused by having so many value systems to comply with. What felt right in one seemed wrong in the other. For example, I often dream of my Aunt Licy, *Tita Licy*, my great-aunt, whom, as a little girl, I used to visit with my mother every Saturday morning after my dentist appointment, with equal anticipated boredom—or fright—for both duties. *Tita Licy*, *Mamita Anita's* eldest sister, had never married, and she carried her celibacy on her frail shoulders like a burden. I remember climbing the endless stairs to her dark apartment, a cavern with her as its endearing secret monster. And there she was, trapped within those four walls, bent with age, her face crumpled and yellow like an old parchment, her gray hair tied in a ponytail, a youthful old maiden. I still have the vivid image of her back arched over a piece of eternal embroidery she never seemed to finish, and that yarn ball unraveling with vertiginous speed; her agile fingers dancing like elves on the colorful fabric, maybe waiting for an unknown Ulysses to sweep her away. A weird smell emanated from her, cleanliness mixed with a hint of the delicious scent of babies, but with something else to it, like cologne water gone bad, or skin that's been rubbed for too long and is no longer distinct. In fact, it was simply the monotonous and slightly disgusting smell of old age.

As my mother and she conversed, the cavern started revealing its hidden jewels. The dear old lady cherished me as the grandchild she never had. And she punctuated our visit with songs, old Spanish or Sephardic "romances" from medieval times. There was one in particular that was just for me, called "*Una Rubita Como un Rubi,*" or "A Little Blonde Girl Precious As a Ruby," a rosy love story with flowers and altars. But embroidery and singing exquisite ballads were not her only distractions. She had a fetish for history and genealogy, and loved gathering bits of information of all kinds. She read history, gossip columns, newspapers, and magazines, all avidly. She collected odd memorabilia like invitation cards for weddings and *Tefellimes*, the Haquetia word for *Bar Mitzvah*. She was especially fond of British history, and knew everything about the complex alliances of the royal family. Apparently, she had had a British suitor from Manchester, but for some mysterious reason her father had refused to let her marry him, and since then she had consoled herself with an insatiable curiosity for anything British. I often think that her interest in history wasn't coincident-

tal, that, lost as she was in a world that had no place for an old maid, she escaped to the past, where things had an order and a fixed identity, an identity she probably never found for herself. And I know that no matter how rational and knowledgeable and modern I become, there will always be a part of *Tita Licy* in me.

I have often considered my Westernized, rational, civilized self as an alien in the body of a more basic, authentic self; or I think of myself as double, like those androgynous beings in Plato's famous parable. But that also seems inaccurate. For if at times I long for Morocco, or Moroccan Jews, and believe the longing embodies the missing pea, I know the questioning is endless and goes far beyond a simple division between two or even multiple selves. What I love and cherish one moment, I reject the next, and so it goes, the story of the self. Perhaps I am just made with pieces to be grafted together and voids to be filled. But in the end, I like to think of myself as an all-inclusive structure, an ever-changing ocean's surface echoing the glittering kisses of Tangier's sun.

Mona Abousenna

GIRLS' HONOR AND INTELLECTUALS' SHAME

Egypt 2007 Arabic

Born in 1945, Mona Abousenna is the founder and secretary general of two international philosophical associations, the Afro-Asian Philosophy Association, and the Averroes and Enlightenment International Association. She is Professor emeritus of English and comparative literature in the Faculty of Education at Ain Shams University in Cairo. She writes extensively on various issues, including gender, Islam, language, literature, and drama.

This article appeared in *Rose El-Youssef*, a weekly magazine with liberal leanings, named for the woman who founded it early in the twentieth century. Its publication was triggered by the death of a twelve-year-old girl named Bodour, during a circumcision operation undertaken by a woman doctor in a clinic in one of the towns of Upper Egypt. The incident focused attention on the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM), also called female genital cutting. This practice, most often performed on young girls, has continued in Egypt despite a long history of activism against it by Egyptian feminists and child advocates, and despite the government's proclaimed attempts to eradicate it. Legislation also prohibits the practice, albeit in general terms, through the penal code's ban on inflicting deliberate bodily injury on any person. The law, however, remains virtually unenforced, with the government turning a blind eye and allowing the operation to be carried out under medical supervision.

Prior to the death of Bodour, FGM had also been a largely taboo subject in the Egyptian media. However, the media coverage of her case was extensive, and led to heated debates. "Girls' Honor and Intellectuals' Shame" was one of the scores of articles that appeared in various newspapers and magazines immediately