

Article

# “We Became Religious to Protect Our Children”: Diasporic Religiosity among Moroccan Jewish Families in France and Israel

Yona Elfassi Abeddour <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Middle East Studies/Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, P.O. Box 653, Beer-Sheva 8410501, Israel; abeddour@post.bgu.ac.il

<sup>2</sup> Centre Émile Durkheim, Sciences Politique et Sociologie Comparatives, Sciences Po Bordeaux, 33607 Pessac CEDEX, France

**Abstract:** This article explores the formation and preservation of a distinctive “Moroccan Judaism” ethos, rooted in a connection to the homeland and an idealized Moroccan past. Through an examination of secularism, traditionalism, and modernity in Israel and France, alongside the resurgence of religiosity in secular societies, it assesses the impact of diasporic experiences on the religious practices of Moroccan-origin families in these countries. The argument posits that diasporic sentiments and the allure of Moroccan heritage significantly influence the negotiation and affirmation of religious identities within these families. Rituals and religious practices serve as expressions of this identity, undergoing adaptation and transformation both in Morocco and abroad. Consequently, “Israeli” and “French” approaches to Moroccan Jewish observance reflect distinct socio-political and historical contexts. The analysis draws from five family cases, illustrating a range of experiences within national and transnational frameworks, enriching our understanding of the dynamic interplay between personal narratives and broader social and historical landscapes.

**Keywords:** diaspora; religiosity; identities; Moroccan Jews; Chabad



**Citation:** Abeddour, Yona Elfassi. 2024. “We Became Religious to Protect Our Children”: Diasporic Religiosity among Moroccan Jewish Families in France and Israel. *Religions* 15: 587. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050587>

Academic Editor: Daniel J. Levine

Received: 1 March 2024

Revised: 8 April 2024

Accepted: 4 May 2024

Published: 10 May 2024



**Copyright:** © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

On a summer morning in 2016, I was filming at the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem with Moshe in his spice shop when he spotted a passing rabbi and immediately invited him to participate in our interview. Moshe is an Israeli-born Jew who speaks impeccable Moroccan Arabic, which he acquired from his parents and frequent visits to Morocco. His shop was adorned with pictures of righteous rabbis, photographs from his trips to Morocco, and a small Moroccan flag, indicating his deep admiration for the country. As the rabbi passed by, Moshe recognized him as someone worth conversing with. It then became clear why Moshe found him interesting to talk to. The rabbi, dressed in a black suit and a round black hat, was born in 1965 in the Mellah of Casablanca. He recounted his mother’s words, “May we never need to see that place [Morocco] again”. He also expressed that despite their comfortable life with the “Arabs in Morocco”,<sup>1</sup> who he described as a truly sympathetic people, he emphasized that “there is nothing like home”, in reference to Israel.

The explanation of the rabbi’s statements is two-fold. First, his family had noticeably undergone hardships in the Jewish quarter of Casablanca before moving to Israel. Second, he expressed a strong religious Zionist discourse regarding the return to the homeland. Upon hearing the rabbi speak, Moshe interrupted him and said the following in Moroccan Arabic:

He became an Ashkenazi now (while imitating his movement and way of speaking, the rabbi kept laughing). The rabbis in Morocco used to wear Jellaba and Tarboush, not like the Ashkenazim. What, are we Ashkenazi now? Where is our forefather’s heritage? (He ran inside his shop and came back with the portrait

of a “Moroccan” Rabbi). Look! (Pointing to the portrait with a slightly upset tone) This is Rabbi Haim Yossef David Azoulay, he resembles him (referring to the interviewed rabbi), but they are not wearing the same hat (referring to the black round hat customarily worn by Chabad versus the traditional turban worn by the rabbi on the portrait). Do you understand? This is *our* Morocco.

This interaction illustrates the dynamics of how religiosity is claimed and performed by two religious men, both of Moroccan descent and belonging to the same generation. Moshe’s attire, including his black kippa and the religious symbols hanging on his shop’s wall, indicate that he is an observant Jew. The rabbi, on the other hand, visibly adheres to the Chabad orthodoxy, as evident from his outfit and the round black hat he wore. Moshe expressed his disapproval of joining the Chabad movement, which he saw not only as adopting an orthodox way of life but also as “becoming Ashkenazi”. Moshe, just like other Jews who cling to their “forefathers’ heritage”, resisted these foreign movements that he believed came at the expense of their own traditions. Moshe clutched on his chest the portrait of Rabbi Haim Yossef David Azoulay dressed in what he described as Moroccan traditional rabbinic tunic and turban.<sup>2</sup> His point was to juxtapose the 18th century “Moroccan” rabbi, representing “our forefather’s heritage”, i.e., Moroccan traditions, and the contemporary rabbi, who, according to Moshe, has become Ashkenazi.

This prompts the question: Why do two individuals of Moroccan Jewish descent, belonging to the same generation, interpret and practice Judaism differently? Moreover, this article aims to explore the broader inquiry into how so-called Moroccan Judaism has evolved within disparate diasporic contexts.

The formulation of Judaism, as we recognize it today, was forged considerably in the Diaspora in the aftermath of the dispersion of the Jewish people. Over the course of more than 2000 years, it has undergone a process of acculturation in host societies from East to West. Haim Zafrani, a prominent historian, wrote extensively about the evolution of Jewish societies in the Islamic West, particularly in the far Maghreb area, which is now known as Morocco.<sup>3</sup> Zafrani describes the Jews of Morocco as “the product of the Maghrebian land where it was born, where it was nourished, and where it has lived for nearly two thousand years” (Zafrani 2005, p. X).

Departing from the idea that the dominant national culture typically exerts an influence on subordinate religious cultures (Sharot 1996), Jews in Morocco have entangled certain patterns from the majority culture, both religious and profane, into their own Jewish beliefs and practices. Stephen Sharot (1996) elaborates on the close relationship between Jews and Muslims in Middle Eastern societies and their shared practices that predate the coming of Islam. Living in a diverse society with various religious practices and beliefs (polytheistic, Islamic, Sufi, and Christian), as well as different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Amazigh, Arab, Portuguese, Spanish, and French), has significantly shaped the nature of religious and cultural functioning among Jews in Morocco.

The cultural expressions of the dominant society, such as food, music, literature, philosophy, language, and religion, have been incorporated into the religious and cultural life of Jewish communities throughout Morocco. Despite their social, cultural, and linguistic diversity (Chetrit 2008), Jewish communities in Morocco were assigned a homogenous character during the colonial era, categorized within a national framework of “Moroccan” Jewry. This notion arose during the same colonial epoch when the boundaries of today’s Maghreb countries were demarcated (Schroeter 2008, p. 146). However, according to Schroeter, this “relatively recent ‘Moroccan’ identity” did not negate or replace their pre-existing identities based on their places of origin within Morocco, including their city, community, or region, language (Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, Berber), or rite (Sephardi or Castilian, and “native” or *toshav*) (Schroeter 2008, pp. 146–47). Ultimately, with the departure of Jews from Morocco in the mid-twentieth century and their relocation in France and Israel, their local religio-cultural specificities were, again, understood within larger categories of analysis: North African, Sephardic, and/or Oriental (*Mizrahi*) Jews.

This article investigates the development and preservation of an ethos of “Moroccan Judaism”, which allows for a cultural connection to the country of origin and an imagined Moroccan “Golden Age”. By analyzing the interplay of concepts such as “secularism”, “traditionalism”, and “modernity” within the contexts of Israel and France, alongside the phenomenon of the return of the religious in secularized society, the goal is to assess how diasporic experiences have influenced the religious practices of Moroccan-origin families residing in France and Israel today.

The primary argument I aim to support is that diasporic feelings and practices,<sup>4</sup> as well as the Moroccan ‘pastness’, play a significant role in the process of negotiating, reclaiming, and affirming the religious identities of the families examined here. The religious aspect of identity is expressed through rituals, recitals, and other religious practices. Moroccan Judaism has undergone significant transformation, negotiation, and adaptation in its country of origin and continues to do so in other societies, contributing to reimagining and reinventing traditions and religious practices appropriate to the new country. As a result, there exist “Israeli” and “French” approaches to observing Moroccan Jewish practices that align with their respective socio-political contexts and historical processes.

Following an overview of the historical trajectory of Moroccan Judaism, spanning its evolution within its country of origin and subsequent diasporic communities, this article proceeds to delineate the methodologies employed in data collection. The subsequent section delves into a theoretical discourse on secularism, religiosity, traditionalism, and modernity within the contexts of Israel and France, examining the phenomenon of religious resurgence. Moving forward, the fourth section presents empirical findings derived from interviews with the members of five Moroccan Jewish families, elucidating the nuanced evolution of religiosity across generations within the diasporic landscapes of France and Israel. Finally, the conclusion revisits the central argument, asserting the emergence of distinct “Israeli” and “French” manifestations of Moroccan Judaism resulting from these transformative processes.

## 2. Materials and Methods

I explored and documented five sets of family narratives through mainly ethnographic qualitative methods and over a period of six years (2016–2022). The field site stretches from Paris, Lyon, and Toulouse, in France to Jerusalem, Giv’at Ze’ev, Netanya, and Beersheva in Israel. Through these mobile life trajectories, I aimed to analyze the modes by which the second and third generation of Moroccan Jewish immigrant families narrate, perform, affirm, and negotiate their accounts of themselves.

To collect data, an interdisciplinary approach was adopted, combining sociological and anthropological or, more specifically, ethnographic methods that are particularly useful in examining people’s everyday life interactions and how they interpret the world they live in (Bruner 1990, 2001; Maykut and Morehouse 1994). Accordingly, my ethnographic fieldwork unfolds primarily through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, in addition to notetaking, audio/video recording, and analysis.

The research corpus was constituted by data with approximately 38 members of five families, born between the 1930s and the early 2000s, spanning three generations. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with individuals from their social circles. The corpus also includes manuscripts and books written by some family members, family biographies, photos, diaries, and other relevant materials.

Throughout the research, the focus remained on these families not solely as French or Israeli individuals, but rather as unique family units with their own distinct characteristics and narratives. The research methodology employed a singular case study approach, recognizing the effectiveness of this approach in offering a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of a particular configuration or context. The five family cases each provide an example of individual cases, revealing the variety of cases situated within national and transnational contexts, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the interplay between personal narratives and the social and historical contexts in which they unfold.

### 3. Exploring the Socio-Political Contexts of France and Israel

#### 3.1. Secularism, Religiosity, and Traditionalism in Israel and France

The modern state of Israel is legally defined as *the Jewish State*. Davis and Lehn (1983) discuss the significance of the declaration of Israel as the Jewish State, rather than a sovereign independent one. They argue that members of the People's Council who formulated the draft "consciously avoided words that would have specified the sovereignty and independence of the proposed state, emphasizing only its Jewishness" (Davis and Lehn 1983, p. 146). Røislien's study, for instance, shows that many Israeli Jewish soldiers in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) view their Jewishness as central to their sense of solidarity and identity (Røislien 2013, p. 220). This is exemplified by the fact that ultra-orthodox Jews are typically exempted from mandatory military service, as are non-Jews, with the exception of certain minority groups such as Druze, Bedouins, and Circassians, who do serve in the IDF. The rationale for these exemptions is to grant ultra-orthodox Jews the possibility "to devote their lives to the fulfillment of Jewish religious commandments" (Røislien 2013, p. 219). Although this is put into practice, it is not entirely endorsed by the law,<sup>5</sup> at least just yet given the current political climate in Israel.<sup>6</sup> This illustrates the significant role that Jewishness plays in defining the modern state of Israel. In contrast to Israel, the French Republic aspires to assert an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social republic that guarantees the equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of their origin, race, or religion.<sup>7</sup> This denotes that the Jewish question is treated differently in each state. I will first elaborate on the concept of secularism in the respective national contexts of France and Israel.

Secularism is typically translated into French as "*laïcité*". In his book *Les Âmes Errantes* (2017), Tobie Nathan explores the etymology of the word "*laïc*" and reveals that it originates from the Greek word "*Laos*" (*Λαός*), meaning "people" or "commonality". The term is similar in meaning to the Latin word "*Vulgus*", which means "the masses" or "the multitude". Nathan contends that "*laïc*" connotes ignorance of religion, and this notion is later applied to the level of the state, which is meant to remain ignorant of religion and religious affairs ((Nathan 2017), especially the first chapter entitled "*Laïcité et guerre des dieux*" [*Laïcité and the war of gods*]). Consequently, the concept of "*laïc*", which refers to an ignorant person of religion, is juxtaposed against "*cleric*", a knowledgeable person about religion.

What can be reiterated is that secularism, or *laïcité*, refers to the separation of religion from the public space, which de facto demarcates secularism against religiosity. Secularization also entails the removal of territory or property from the control of ecclesiastical authorities. However, this concept primarily applies to Western societies, including France, a predominantly and inherently Christian country where the notion of *laïcité* continues to guide the discourse on national identity (see, for example, Roy 2005). Notably, the idea of private versus public space is initially rooted in Christian (especially Protestant) theology, as argued by Taylor (2007) and Koenig (2016). Therefore, it is crucial to take into account the contexts in which these terms developed to better understand them.

The closest translation of *laïc* in Hebrew is the term "*hiloni*" which is commonly used to designate secular Jews. While "*hiloni*" might function as a 'translation equivalent'<sup>8</sup> for "*laïc*" in a linguistic sense, the nuances and connotations of the two terms diverge significantly. Beyond mere linguistic correspondence, the terms operate within distinct cultural, social, and historical contexts, shaping and reflecting specific divisions within their respective communities. The term "*laïc*" in French carries particular associations with the secularism of the French state and its historical separation of church and state. *Laïcité* is arguably the *raison d'être* of France's national identity. Conversely, "*hiloni*" in Hebrew may relate to Jews who are the least religious but also carries cultural and historical connotations unique to the Jewish experience. Despite these differences, both terms are intertwined with broader, transnational ideological movements concerning the role of religion in society, secularization, and the negotiation of identity within diverse cultural landscapes. Thus, while they may manifest differently in their respective linguistic and cultural contexts,

both “*laïc*” and “*hiloni*” reflect broader shifts and debates regarding the interplay between religion, identity, and modernity on a global scale.

Additionally, while “*hiloni*” refers to Jews who identify more with secularism rather than religious observance, there are several variations that are used to denote its opposite, such as “*dati*” (religious), “*dati le’umi*” (national religious, or religious Zionist), “*haredi*” (orthodox or ultra-orthodox), and “*masorti*” (traditional or traditionalist). Each of these terms reflects a distinct aspect of religious observance within the Jewish community, spanning from stringent adherence to traditional religious precepts to a more generalized commitment to religious practice.

As previously mentioned, the concept of secularity in Jewish society is understood and “practiced” differently from that of Western society, which requires explanation when discussing it in the context of Israel. Israeli sociologist Hagar Lahav’s research provides valuable insights into this concept (Lahav 2021). Lahav conducted in-depth interviews with “secular-believer” women, as she calls her informants, and found that they self-identify as secular but still hold beliefs in some form of divinity. She notes that *Emunah* (belief) is part of their secularity as Israeli Jews. These secular Jews, who constitute about half of the Jews in Israel (Keissar-Sugarmen 26), tend to observe specific religious practices, mainly the ones related to the circle of life (Lahav 2015, p. 17). Thereby, while some secular Jews may not believe in anything transcendent or strictly practice any religious customs, others preserve certain traditional religious practices (Greilsammer 2007, p. 41), such as the circumcision of newborn males, celebrating their children’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah, marrying under a Chuppah, or being buried in a Jewish cemetery. These “religious” practices are observed as a form of connection with Jewish culture and history, and less as religious obligations. This is exemplified in Section 4, where family members of Moroccan Jewish descent, despite identifying as “secular”, still maintain certain religious traditions. As such, as Roy suggests, believers and non-believers can share common cultural and value systems (Roy 2008, p. 28).

The Western-style discourse on secularism would have a lesser impact on Jews from Islamic lands. In this regard, Taylor observes that, outside of the West, “almost all other contemporary societies (e.g., Islamic countries, India, Africa)” (Taylor 2007, p. 1) do not live in a “secular age”. In other words, in Islamic countries, state and religion continue to interact and co-depend on each other. As a result, Jews who thrived in this context, like their Muslim neighbors, may not view religion and secularism as an oppositional binary. For the most part, they have maintained an equilibrium between religious traditions and modern secular culture. In this regard, Asad (2018) argues that language plays a crucial role in defining and reinforcing the boundaries between religion and the secular world. He notes that the very terms used to describe secularism and religion are often imbued with particular meanings and assumptions, which can vary across different cultural and historical contexts.

Historian Norman Stillman observes that prior to the mass exodus of Jews from Muslim and Arab countries in the mid-twentieth century, the Sephardi community’s responses to the challenges of a changing world primarily emerged from within the tradition itself, which helped to preserve the viability and integrity of Sephardi Judaism (Stillman 1995, p. 19). He adds that, “many Sephardim, while not punctilious in fulfilling the 613 commandments, maintain many religious traditions” (ibid. p. 26). This demonstrates that, on the one hand, traditional religious practices are an integrated part of Sephardi Jews’ lifestyle, coexisting alongside modern secular routines. On the other, individuals also exercise personal agency in deciding which commandments to observe or disregard, and under what circumstances. This aspect will be exemplified in the next section through the case of Corinne Sisso, who grapples with the decision of observing Shabbat versus her family attending her nephew’s wedding, which falls on Shabbat.

While living in secularized societies, a new term has emerged to describe Jews who are in-between, i.e., neither strictly religious nor entirely secular. These Jews self-define as traditionalists (*masortiyeem*) or keepers of the traditions (*shomrei masoret*). In Israel,

approximately 40 percent of the Jewish population identifies as traditionalist, with the majority of these being Jews from Muslim countries, as observed by Meir Buzaglo (2008, p. 47). He goes on to argue that “traditionalism (*masortiyut*) (. . .) demonstrates the difficulty of separating the ongoing debate between religious and secular [Israeli Jews] from the ethnic problems in the State of Israel” (ibid.). ‘Traditionalist’ is a term adopted by many Jews who find it the most fitting for their degree of religious observation.

A similar pattern is observed among Sephardic/North African Jewry in France. In her study on the Jews of Toulouse (1998), historian Collette Zytnicki notes that, for Ashkenazi Jews, observing Shabbat and kashrut are closely intertwined, while for Sephardic Jews, they are relatively independent of each other (Zytnicki 1998). André and Renée Neher also observed that, among newly arrived North African Jewish families in the early 1960s, the observance that was most commonly dropped was Shabbat. While Jewish stores and companies still did not close on Saturday, the number of kosher butchers multiplied by 10 (Neher and Neher 1964, p. 3, cited in Zytnicki 1998). Zytnicki notes that North African Jews are extremely attached to religious practices, for instance they are scrupulous when it comes to Kashrut. In France, however, many detached themselves from many of these practices. Zytnicki deduces that the new arrivals were more religious than their metropolitan coreligionists (Zytnicki 1998, pp. 217–65). The decline in religious practices among North African Jewry after their arrival in the French metropole was equally confirmed by other scholars (Taïeb and Tapia 1972). The following section tackles the concept of modernity and its impact on society at large, as well as on the family unit in particular.

### 3.2. The Effects of Modernity

Education had unquestionably a major role in paving the way for modernity and an “accelerated process of modernization” (Abitbol 1994) among Jewish communities scattered around the Middle East and North Africa. The Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) was a major driving force in this process, establishing its first school as early as 1862 in Morocco, in the northern city of Tetuan, and expanding to other cities and towns throughout the country. The primary goal of the AIU was to “acculturate the Jews in the tradition of French secular education. (. . .) [the AIU schools] served as vehicles for the Jews to absorb the concepts of equality, fraternity, and liberty” (Laskier 1983, p. 33). The AIU’s early European teachers and directors were missionaries for primarily secular education, yet they “tried to strike a balance between the profane and the sacred in their educational policies” (Laskier 1983, p. 44).

Coming in close contact with the French ‘civilizing mission’ that this educational institution imposed, the young Moroccan Jews who spoke Arabic at home were now forbidden to use it. These secular schools produced a new generation of *des juifs francisés* (Frenchified Jews) or *des évolués* (evolved Jews), as modern Jews who are AIU-educated were called (Kenbib 2011), who developed a national, cultural, and emotional attachment to France, which often resulted in conflicting relationships within families. This clarifies why France did not feel entirely foreign to these Jewish individuals, with many experiencing a feeling of “*rentrer*” (returning) to France, a sentiment that was equally embraced by those who had never visited the French mainland.

The secular education that the AIU schools offered was not met with full approval by the traditional rabbis and community leaders, even in the most progressive coastal and port communities (Laskier 1983, p. 80). As a result, concessions had to be made, and some AIU schools were jointly administered by the AIU and the community, allowing the latter to closely supervise the schools’ work and sometimes interfere with its functioning (ibid., p. 81). Some AIU schools had to close due to rabbinic opposition, but loyal allies within the community ensured that they were reopened. This demonstrates that integrating modern education was a daunting task, especially in traditional communities. In some interior communities, such as Fez and Meknes, “Jewish traditionalism, similar to that of Islam, was firmly rooted in the lives of the Jews” (Laskier 1983, p. 86). However, with the expansion of French powers, more Jewish communities welcomed the schools, and others

even demanded the establishment of the AIU in their respective localities, including remote rural areas (*ibid.*, p. 91).

The process of modernization had undoubtedly improved the lives and socioeconomic status of Moroccan Jewish families; however, this whole process may have caused social disorganization and changes in family dynamics. This process involved a “reinvention of tradition” (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1983), which required the negotiation and reconstruction of memories, leaving out certain things and adding others (Hale 2013). Lerner (1958) describes modernity as a “particular style of life”, while Bell defines it as “a sense of openness to change, of detachment from place and time, of social and geographical mobility, and a readiness, if not eagerness, to welcome the new, even at the expense of tradition and the past” (Bell 1987, p. 123).

We can argue that this “personality transformation” of some Moroccan Jews was accompanied by an identity crisis and conflicts within families, as well as having consequences on their religiosity. Sociologist Yaacov Loupo argues that this modernization and its effect on traditional leadership allowed Lithuanian ultra-orthodox influence to penetrate Morocco, mainly through the school system. Interestingly, modern secular education also entered traditional Jewish communities in the same way. These Lithuanians aimed to “save” young Moroccan Jews from the “outcomes” of modernity pioneered in North Africa by the AIU (Loupo 2006, p. 35). Subsequently, Moroccan Jews, under the influence of ultra-orthodox and other Ashkenazi streams, started attending yeshivas (religious schools) that were established in Morocco and Europe (Loupo 2006). As mentioned earlier, these waves of modernity brought reactions, and at times resistance, among Jewish families, particularly the rabbis, of the traditional Jewish society. It is worth noting that the phenomenon of Sephardic Jews adopting an Ashkenazi way of life or school of thought did not occur only in the countries of arrival, as the process of “becoming ultra-orthodox” began already in the country of origin. However, Gottreich and Schroeter asserted that “modernity interacted, coexisted, and was assimilated into the quotidian culture of North African Jews rather than simply replacing it” (Gottreich and Schroeter 2011, pp. 10–11), suggesting that modernity did not necessarily end the traditional lifestyle of Jews in Morocco, but rather it was incorporated into their daily lives. I now examine the interplay between religion and culture and the implications of their divergence.

### 3.3. *The “Return” of the Religious in a Secularized Society?*

People’s religious practices and beliefs adapt, evolve, and might transform over time and space depending on the national, political, and cultural contexts. There is no doubt that religion, implicitly or explicitly, constitutes a significant trait of the individual’s social fabric, who we are, and how we perceive the world around us. Having said that, the aim of this article is not to provide a definition of religion as such (for a proper definition, see Cohen 2009; Geertz 1973), but rather to examine the socioreligious transformation of a particular society, community, family, or individual. Geertz argues that religion is not just a set of beliefs or rituals, but rather a complex system of symbols that gives meaning to people’s lives and shapes their worldviews. This means that religion is embedded in the culture, it is seen as an integral part of a given culture (Roy 2008, p. 56). Before tackling the notion of the “return” of the religious, it is necessary to first understand the meaning of a secularized society.

Olivier Roy, a French political scientist, figures prominently in contemporary debates on globalization and the post-secular. He maintains that the “return” or rather visibility of religion in a society is an outcome of secularism. According to Roy, the revival of religiosity is not a reaction to secularization, but rather its product, resulting in a mutation rather than a “return” per se of the religious (Roy 2008, p. 21). He explains that secularization did not remove the religious but detached it from the cultural environment, making it appear as “pure” religious (*ibid.*, p. 20). Moreover, Roy points out that secularism facilitated the autonomy of religion in a secular society, thus enabling its expansion (*ibid.*, pp. 20–21). An extremely relevant point that Roy makes, which constitutes the title of his 2008 book, *Holy*

*Ignorance: when Religion and Culture Part Ways*, is that secularization and globalization have compelled religions to detach from culture. This has resulted in a shift in the perception of religion, as it is no longer seen in its cultural form but as “pure” religion (ibid., p. 25).

This detachment from culture, Roy argues, has resulted in a phenomenon he calls “holy ignorance”, which can lead to a more fundamentalist approach to religion, as individuals focus solely on the religious doctrine rather than the cultural practices and traditions that were previously intertwined with their faith. This detachment has also given rise to new religious movements that do not necessarily conform to traditional cultural practices, but rather emphasize the individual’s personal experience of spirituality. Therefore, according to Roy, the “return” of the religious is not a return to traditional cultural forms of religion, but rather a new form of religion that is disconnected from culture and emphasizes individual experience. Chabad, for instance, is often viewed as a generic outreach Jewish orthodox movement, placing significant emphasis on the individual’s personal experience of spirituality rather than solely adhering to traditional cultural practices.

Chabad, also known as Lubavitch, is a leading Chasidic movement characterized by strict halakhic observance and behavior. It originated in a Russian village of the same name (Lubavitch) and is a prime example of how a network of emissaries of Orthodox Jews can be found almost everywhere. Their philosophy of tolerance and love for fellow Jews, regardless of their difference, has made them appealing to the public. Chabad emissaries can be easily spotted on university campuses and main avenues of major cities such as Paris, Tel Aviv, London, New York, and Casablanca. Chabad has had a significant influence and activity in Morocco, as evidenced by their publication “*Toldot Chabad b’Morocco*” [The History of Chabad in Morocco] (2016). I elaborate more on Chabad’s impact on the Moroccan Jewish community in the discussion section.

Through an exploration of the religiosity of the research families, I examine the larger process of “becoming” religious, which in Hebrew translates to “*chazara betshuva*” (it can be literally translated as “returning with an answer”), positioning religion and religious practices as the ultimate answer to both worldly and heavenly questions. There is also the notion of “*hetchatzkut*”, or the strengthening of religious practice and engagement. I elaborate here on these notions within the specific case of the Chabad orthodox stream. By examining Chabad’s methods and influence, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the movement has contributed to shaping contemporary Jewish identities and practices, particularly among those who may not have had a strong Jewish upbringing or background. In addition, studying Chabad provides insights into the ongoing debates within Judaism regarding the balance between tradition and modernity, and the tensions between strict religious observance and outreach to non-observant Jews.

As a reaction to—or protest against—an increasingly secularized society, some parents seek to “protect” their families from the outcomes of modern society, including assimilation, by returning to religion and strengthening their religious identity. In Judaism, this process is known as *Chazara betshuva* and is a form of repentance. Conversely, leaving the orthodox Jewish community is described as “*yetsiya be’she’ela*”, or “leaving in question”. Due to the dual meaning of the Hebrew word *tshuva* as both ‘repentance’ and ‘answer’, a pun or wordplay emerged. The concept of *tshuva*, commonly translated as repentance, is fundamental to understanding the process of “becoming” religious in Judaism. For instance, as will be further explored in the next section, the Sisso family’s return to religiosity does not necessarily entail strict adherence to all practices observed by other religious Jews. It is pertinent to note that the term *halacha* signifies a process or pathway rather than a fixed destination.

In this context, the family unit has become an important site for the negotiation of religious identity and belief. As individuals and communities struggle to navigate the changing landscape of religious belief and practice, families are often where these debates and discussions take place. Parents may seek to instill their own religious beliefs in their children, while children may push back against these beliefs or seek to explore other paths.

This can lead to conflict within families, but can also be a source of transformation as families navigate the complex terrain of modern religious belief.

Notwithstanding the generational divide imposed by social institutions in modern societies, the family, as a small social unit, remains a crucial space for intergenerational contact and interaction. Taking a micro approach, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex processes of identity formation and transformation within diaspora communities. By examining the experiences of five families across multiple generations and locations, with an emphasis on the historical, national, and geographical contexts that shape identity formation, this paper seeks to shed light on the diverse ways in which diasporic individuals construct and negotiate their identities over time.

Five sets of family narratives across three generations were documented and explored through a combination of oral history, non-directive and in-depth interviews, and participant observation during a six-year period (2016–2022). To gain a better understanding of each family’s background, I compiled a sociological tabulation that includes predefined indicators for each household, see Table 1. This exercise helps situate the families within their respective contexts by considering factors such as their geographic location, places of origin, and current residence. It also takes into account their educational background, socio-economic status, the citizenship(s) they possess, the language(s) they speak within the private sphere, the level of religiosity, and other relevant factors. By examining these various factors, we can better understand each family and their respective circumstances.

Several observations from the following table highlight that, while migratory patterns may seem homogeneous at first glance, this is not entirely the case. The data allow for several conclusions. Firstly, the concept of social mapping is particularly useful in this context. It involves considering where the families originate from in Morocco, where they currently reside in France/Israel, and how this impacts their self-understanding. While the families come from both urban and rural areas, they all now live in urban cities. Beginning in the 1960s, there was a massive departure of Jewish people from Morocco, and at the same time, there was a parallel movement of Jewish populations from rural and remote areas to larger cities. This phenomenon has turned Casablanca, which was also a city of transition before emigration to other countries, into the Jewish hub in Morocco, where the majority of the Jewish community still resides today.

Secondly, all families left Morocco between 1956, the year of the independence of Morocco—a period that marked a time of transition and brought about significant instability, leading many people (including Jews and Muslims) to leave—and two years prior to the 1967 Six Day War in Israel, which is considered a key date in the exodus of Jews from Muslim countries including Morocco. Thirdly, all the families who opted to move to Israel tend to share a Zionist narrative, or at least perceive their immigration as such. Notably, both French families also express favorable sentiments towards Zionism and the Jewish State, despite not having relocated there *yet*. Moreover, while some families have returned to Morocco as part of heritage tours spanning over three generations, others have never been back there. This has inevitably impacted their children’s decisions.

**Table 1.** This table presents the five families across three generations.

Criterion	Generation	Azuolos	Marciano	Abuhassera	Chetrit	Sisso
City(ies) of origin of the Moroccan side of the family	1	Eljadida-Mazagan	Settat-Casablanca and Demnat (rural)	Rissani and Tinghir (both rural)	Fez	Casablanca
Departure date from Morocco	1 (+2 as children)	1965	1962 (paternal side), 1956 (maternal side)	1963	1961	1956
Reasons for leaving	1	Zionist ideology	Zionist ideology	Zionist ideology	Relocated to France	Fear from an unstable Morocco (during/post independence)

Table 1. Cont.

Criterion	Generation	Azuolos	Marciano	Abuhassera	Chetrit	Sisso
Age and gender of family members	1	1937 (m), 19 (f)	1939 (m), 1949 (f)	1935 (m), 193- (f)	1939 (f), 1935 (m)	19 (m), 19 (f)
	2	1962 (m), 196 (f)	1968 (m), 1969 (f)	1961 (f), 196 (m)	1971 (f), 19 (m)	1963 (m), 1965 (f)
	3	1990 (m), 1992 (f), 1995 (m), 2000 (m)	1994 (m), 1997 (f)	1987 (m), 1989 (f), 1992 (f), 1999 (f)	2017 (m)	1990 (f), 1992 (m), 1996 (m), 2003 (f)
Professions and areas of study	1	Rabbi, housewife	Musician and banker, housewife	Commerce, housewife	Telecom technician	
	2	CEO (Ph.d.), Doctor (Ph.d.)	Administrative job, housewife	Teacher, army officer	Management and marketing	Family business
	3	B.A., Medicine studies, Yeshiva, musician	Waiter, army service	BA, police, Lawyer, Preparatory classes	N/A	Family business
Current cities of residence	1	Jerusalem	Netanya-Kiryat Gat	Beersheva	Toulouse	Lyon
	2	Giv'at Ze'ev	Netanya	Beersheva	Paris	Ecully
	3	Jerusalem-Giv'at Ze'ev	Netanya	Beersheva	Paris	Lyon-Ecully
Citizenship(s) held by the family members	1	Israeli	Israeli and Moroccan	Israeli	French	French
	2	Israeli	Israeli	Israeli	French	French and Israeli
	3	Israeli	Israeli	Israeli	French	French and Israeli
Relatives in France, Israel, and/or Morocco	All	Relatives in France	Relatives in France and Morocco	None	Relatives in Israel	Daughter in Israel
Family's visits or returns to Morocco	1	2012, 2019	Several times	Never	Mother (once)	Never
	2	2012, 2018, 2019	The father several times, the mother twice	2022	2021	Never
	3	2019	2019, 2023	Never	2021	Never (except for work)
Languages spoken at home	1 (in Morocco)	MA and FR	MA and FR	MA and Berber	FR and MA	FR and MA
	1 (in Israel or France)	FR & HE & MA	FR & HE & MA	MA & HE	FR	FR
	2	HE	HE	HE	FR	FR
	3	HE	HE	HE	FR	FR
Languages used for communication	1	FR	FR and MA and HE	HE	FR	N/A
	2	HE	HE and MA	HE	FR	FR
	3	HE and EN	HE	HE and EN	N/A	FR
Presence of other ethnicities within the family	1	None	None	None	None	Algerian husband
	2	Ashkenazi wife	None	Persian husband	Israeli of Tunisian origins partner	Algerian wife
	3	Ashkenazi wife, Tunisian husband, Kurdish wife	Moroccan boyfriend	N/A	N/A	Half Algerian wife

Table 1. Cont.

Criterion	Generation	Azuelos	Marciano	Abuhassera	Chetrit	Sisso
Level of religious observance (based on Shabbat observance)	1	Strict Shabbat observant	Not Shabbat observant	Strict Shabbat observant	Not Shabbat observant	Not Shabbat observant
	2	Strict Shabbat observant	Not Shabbat observant	Strict Shabbat observant	Not Shabbat observant	(Became) light Shabbat observant
	3	Strict Shabbat observant	Not Shabbat observant	Strict Shabbat observant	N/A	(Became) light Shabbat observant
Political tendencies/ affiliations	1	Far right	Far right	Right wing	Right wing tendencies	N/A
	2	Centre	Centre	Both vote far right	Right wing tendencies	Right wing
	3	Centre-right wing	Centre	Far right	N/A	Right wing
Family's living situation	2 & 3	A two-story house in a middle-class town near Jerusalem	A 120 m2 apartment in the city center of Netanya	A house in a middle/high-class neighborhood of Beersheva	Rents a two-room apartment downtown Paris and co-owns a three-room apartment in the outskirts of Paris	A villa with a pool in Ecully
Gateway to the family	2 & 3	Uri (b. 1990)	Yosef (b. 1968)	Orel (b. 1987)	Véronique (b.1971)	Guy (b. 1963)
How and when we met	2 & 3	Facebook (2014) and in person (2016)	Friend in common (2017)	University (2016)	Facebook (2014) and in person (2017)	Synagogue (2016)

### A Three-Generation Table of the Five Research Families

The table presented above provides important information regarding the families included in the research across three generations. It includes details such as the birth cities of family members, the dates of their departure from Morocco, and the reasons behind their migration, which can be summarized as either driven by Zionist ideology (a desire to “return” to the biblical homeland of Israel) or motivated by economic, political, or educational factors. The birth years are also listed, although for some cases, the exact birth year of the first generation is unknown. The table also provides information about the current situation of the families in their respective countries of arrival, including the cities they currently reside in. It includes details about the professions of certain family members and their living arrangements, as these can be indicative of their socio-economic status. The table also mentions the citizenships held; for instance, in the case of the Sisso family, they hold Israeli citizenship while still residing in France.

The presence of family members remaining in Morocco is indicated, as well as whether any family members have visited Morocco. The visits made by the Azuelos and Marcianos families to Morocco will be further analyzed in the upcoming chapters. Language usage across the three generations is highlighted, particularly the languages spoken by the first generation in Morocco compared to the languages spoken in the new countries with an emphasis on the languages we specifically communicated in.

Furthermore, considering that the families reside in multicultural societies, the table reflects the increasing presence of other ethnicities through marriages with Tunisian, Kurdish, Persian, Algerian, and Ashkenazi individuals who are all Jewish. Regarding religious observance, an indication is given based on whether family members observe Shabbat and keep kosher, which serves as a measure of their religious practices. The table also includes an estimation of the political views of family members, either based on their expressed views during interviews, observations made during family gatherings, or insights obtained from their Facebook feeds, especially during elections.

Lastly, the table specifies the family member through whom I gained entry to the family, as well as the circumstances of our meeting. This information is important as it can provide insight into my initial perception of the family before meeting them and how my interactions with the family were sometimes influenced by the person who facilitated their entry.

#### 4. Diasporic Religiosity: Five Family Cases in France and Israel

##### 4.1. *The Azuelos: "When I'm with Sephardim, I'm the Most Ashkenazi; and When with Ashkenazim, I'm the Most Sephardi"*

The Azuelos family resides in Giv'at Ze'ev, a middle-class town located ten kilometers northwest of Jerusalem in the Judea and Samaria region beyond the Green Line. The bus lines that service the town are bulletproof, and as we approach the entrance, a security agent boards the bus to quickly check the passengers. The family's choice to live in a town in the West Bank could be perceived as an indication of their political stance, and less an economic factor given the family's well-established financial situation. Occasionally, their visiting relatives joke that they are "settlers". The town possesses over thirty synagogues, including Sephardic-Moroccan ones where some members of the Azuelos family attend services. The Azuelos family can be considered as a modern Orthodox (or religious Zionist) family. They all strictly observe shabbat and religious holidays, consume only kosher food, and pray three times a day. They recite a prayer for every occasion, such as before consuming different foods and drinks, upon seeing lightning or hearing thunder, during a full moon, and so forth.

Uri (b. 1989), the eldest son, has a deep appreciation for Moroccan liturgical poems and sung prayers. He surrounds himself mostly with friends of Moroccan origin and attends synagogues with a Moroccan rite. If he ever wakes up late and misses shaharit, the morning prayer, he would be contented with attending the nearby Chabad synagogue. On a Shabbat evening before Minha, the evening prayer, Elad, his brother, gave a sermon at the nearby Ashkenazi synagogue. All the male members of the family attended the service, including the grandfather Haim. As the service came to a close, and everyone was wishing each other "Shavoua tov" (Have a good week), Uri was about to cheek-kiss a congregant, a Lebanese born middle-aged man. The man took a step back and said, "We don't kiss in the synagogue". Later, I asked Elad about this incident, and he confirmed that it was "halachically (according to Jewish law) forbidden to kiss in the synagogue", as it is a place where the Torah and God should be given the ultimate priority and respect. "However", he concluded, "We are Moroccans and we do it the Moroccan way", indicating a consciousness of how the cultural aspect of religion is equally important. It is noteworthy that, while Elad typically identifies as more Ashkenazi, he still values and respects the family's Moroccan customs.

##### 4.1.1. Elad, "What's the Significance of a Human Being without an Identity?"

Elad (b. 1995) completed his religious studies at a Bnei Akiva Yeshiva in Haifa, a religious Zionist yeshiva and youth movement.<sup>9</sup> As a way to identify with this particular religious group, Elad wears his kippa to the side. Unlike his siblings, Uri and Araon, who are strongly connected to their Moroccan heritage, all of Elad's friends are Ashkenazim from the Bnei Akiva movement. When it comes to religion, Elad is the strictest member of the family and would sometimes gently criticize the way things are done by his family, arguing that it is not the proper way, which sometimes causes some light tensions. However, when the grandfather is present, he has the final say.

On a January afternoon in 2018, I met with Elad at a mall in Tel Aviv during his lunch break from military service. This was a formal recorded interview that we had scheduled in advance even if most of our conversations happened informally.<sup>10</sup> Our discussions were so engaging that they would often last until 4 AM in Elad's parents' house, particularly during religious holidays when we had no technological distractions.<sup>11</sup> During the formal interview, conducted in both Hebrew and English, Elad, who has clearly given time to

ponder about his own self formation, or in his words about his “identity”, posed the rhetorical question “what’s the significance of a human being without an identity?” He shared that he “feel[s] a sort of a bridge between a world that was and a world that will be”. Elad’s vision is that although the Ashkenazi-Sephardi worlds are presently somewhat divided, they will eventually unite.

Elad confided that he does not feel at home in Haifa, where he attends Yeshiva, “nor even at home”. He seems to be caught in-between and hopes to solve this “identity crisis” by bringing together the two parts that constitute a significant part of who he is. Elad is partially Ashkenazi from his mother’s side and Sephardi from his father’s side. He summarized his ongoing process and search for the self in the following way: “When I’m with Sephardim, I’m the most Ashkenazi, and when with Ashkenazim, I’m the most Sephardi”. Elad’s experience is not uncommon, as many individuals with mixed cultural backgrounds may find themselves navigating different cultural norms and practices depending on the situation they are in.

Elad draws his inspiration from two distinct streams of Judaism. On the one hand, he attended an Ashkenazi Yeshiva in Haifa and was exposed to the teachings of Ashkenazi rabbis. On the other hand, he immersed himself in the Sephardic world of sages, including Maimonides, Rabbi Messas, and Rabbi Ibn Danan, as well as through studying with his grandfather. This has led to a hybrid type of Judaism and a unique Jewish identity. During our conversations, Elad frequently references Rabbis who inspire him. He is obviously influenced by the teachings of Rabbi Oury Amos Cherki, who is originally from Algeria and is a senior lecturer at Yeshivat Machon Meir in Jerusalem. Mechon Meir is a religious Zionist outreach organization and Yeshiva founded by Rabbi Dov Begon. The Yeshiva maintains a close affiliation with Rabbi Tsvi Yehudah Kook, an ultranationalist orthodox rabbi known for advocating that the entire biblical Land of Israel remain in Jewish hands.

Elad finds Rabbi Léon Ashkenazi’s teachings to be a bridge between the traditional and academic worlds, which resonates with his own hybrid approach to Judaism. Rabbi Ashkenazi (1922–1996) was a student of Rabbi Shlomo Binyamin Ashlag and Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, and he played a prominent role in Religious Zionism. Elad is deeply immersed in this school of thought of religious Zionism, which leans toward a far-right Judaism. In one of our meetings in June 2018, Elad suggested that I meet with Rabbi Cherki, even though I might not agree with his political views. When I asked him to elaborate, he said the following:

For example, what [the association] Tikkun is doing,<sup>12</sup> to remind us of the common past between Jews and Muslims in Morocco. For [Rav. Cherki], it is true that there was a positive aspect to that past, but he would also highlight the less positive side. (...) According to him, there was *galut* [exile] and now it is over, we need to focus on returning [to the Land of Israel] and should not dwell too much on the friendship [with the Muslims/Arabs] that Tikkun [association] is working to promote (translated from Hebrew).

Elad’s message, conveyed cautiously and in a politically correct language, is that the history of Jews in the diaspora and their attachment to their birth countries is no longer relevant now that there is a Jewish state in the homeland. He aligns with Rabbi Cherki in prioritizing Jewish settlement and sovereignty in Israel over promoting Muslim-Jewish relations. Elad supports Rabbi Cherki’s view by stating that “we were not always equal under the Muslim law [in Morocco]”, alluding to the *dhimmi* status that Jews had under Muslim rule.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Elad argues that speaking only about how good the past was in the country of origin is a discrepancy in the course of history. He added, “If our friendship with Morocco blurs the [Israeli] national side (...) [or] if it causes forgetting, it is dangerous”.

Elad sees himself as a Jew first, and he believes it is the call of other Jews to strengthen their Jewish identity first to be able to bridge gaps with other religions and cultures. He clarified that if he loves Arab culture, that does not make him Arab, which could be a criticism toward some Jews who self-identify as “Arab Jews”. This view is shared by many religious Zionist and nationalist Jews who vigorously reject the use of this term.

For more information on the topic of self-proclaimed Arab Jews, see [Shohat \(2017\)](#) and [Shenhav \(2006\)](#).

Elad attributes his extensive knowledge of Moroccan Judaism and the Moroccan Jewish law to his grandparents, particularly his grandfather Haim, whom he and his siblings consider an “authentic” source of practicing Judaism. They see in him a living model of how to be a Jew. Elad explains,

My perception of authenticity is [based on] the Torah. Now, what is Torah? Torah is both written and oral. The oral Torah is not only verbal but also behavioral. (. . .) When I study with my grandfather, for example, (. . .) I understand the complexity [of the oral Torah] because I am not [merely] reading a text, I experience the person. For me returning to authentic/original Judaism means sitting with my grandparents [and learning from them]. The oral Torah is way beyond the written word; it is the culture, the Jewish culture, the way of behaving, my perspective on things. I cannot learn these things from a book [alone]. (. . .) I know how to make *matza*, because I saw Saba (grandfather) making it; and I know how to wear *tefillin* [phylacteries] because I saw how he wears them. It is not because it is written in a book (translated from Hebrew).

Despite being influenced and shaped by the Bnei Akiva movement in both his religious and political identity, Elad is committed to learning from his Moroccan-born grandfather. He believes that his grandfather is closer to the authentic source, and if his great-grandfather were still alive, he would choose to learn from him instead. In Elad’s eyes, elder family members are considered more “authentic” due to their proximity to the “source”. Elad even has his grandfather’s photo on his phone’s screensaver, similarly to how one might display a picture of a *tsaddik*, or pious rabbi. Elad has a special relationship with his grandfather, with whom he shares the same middle name. Their relationship is close and intimate, grounded in both spiritual and intellectual connection.

Elad’s brothers, Uri and Aaron, also spend significant amounts of time studying with their grandfather Haim, particularly on Shabbat and holidays. Sometimes Uri visits his grandfather’s home in Jerusalem to study with him for a few hours. During these study sessions, there is a clear transmission of intergenerational knowledge, history, and personal anecdotes. Haim, for instance, places a great emphasis on the importance of learning Arabic, as it is part of the family’s heritage, and insists that his grandchildren learn the language, as Elad told me. In Morocco, Haim used to interpret the Torah using spoken Moroccan Arabic, and he believes that Hebrew and Arabic “share the same roots, they are sister languages in the Semitic family”, as he explained in French. Additionally, he wanted his grandchildren to study the texts of Maimonides in the original language, Judeo-Arabic. This example illustrates how education serves as a means of transmitting not only knowledge, but also a concrete way of living Judaism. Moreover, it is this idealized view of Moroccan Judaism that seems to inspire Haim’s offspring.

Elad reflects on the state of religion in Israel, noting that it has become “threatening, unwelcoming, and marking people with labels”. He argues that the labels of *dati* (religious) and *hiloni* (secular) and others are “*hotet la’Emet*”, misleading and do not accurately represent the truth. Elad believes that religion should return to a more personal and emotional connection, much like the way his grandparents observed Judaism in Morocco and continue to do so in Israel. He yearns for a Judaism that is not bureaucratic, technocratic, or oppressive, but rather one that is more authentic and resonates with people on a deeper level. Elad clearly idealizes a form of Judaism that is familiar to him, one that his grandparents taught him, and hopes to see it practiced more widely.

#### 4.1.2. A Moroccan Jewish model

Haim Azuelos (b. 1937), the grandfather, completed his rabbinic studies in his hometown, Mazagan, before departing to France to attend the Orthodox yeshiva of Fublaines founded by Gershon Liebman, a Holocaust survivor. After spending six years there, he

returned to oversee the yeshiva of Tetuan in northern Morocco. In a 1999 interview, when asked whether he grew up in an orthodox family, he replied with the following:

There is a notion that did not exist chez nous. In Morocco, the notion of “ultra-orthodox” did not exist. When we went to a Jewish family, we ate from everything, we did not ask whether the food was ‘kosher’. This is my family’s tradition which dates centuries back and takes its roots from Castilla (translated from French).

Elad provided his commentary on this quote, explaining that in Morocco, even Jewish families who did not observe kosher would still offer their Jewish guests kosher food. Thus, it was not necessary to ask or cause any embarrassment to the family. This example reflects Elad’s belief that his grandfather is a living model of how to observe Judaism, and it also aligns with Simon Lévy idea that “there is a Moroccan way of being Jewish” (Lévy 2001, p. 21)—which is proper to Moroccan Jews in Israel and France as well. The preservation of this identity in Israel was a response to the ‘melting pot’ policy (Ouaknine-Yekutieli and Nizri 2016; Loupo 2006, p. 14; Shokeid 1980, p. 83), which led to resistance against assimilation. Therefore, as Yaacov Loupo concludes, the state of Israel failed to create,

a unifying culture making of the country a melting pot [...] this project was convenient only to one part of the immigrants, because the others (Oriental Jews) refused to abandon their [cultural] features and their identity of origin to rally in the ‘Western Ashkenazi’ culture. (Loupo 2006, p. 14)

Although two of Haim’s children have adhered to the Chabad movement (a stream of Jewish Orthodoxy), he himself refuses to dress in the typical black costume and hat which are characteristic of Charedi and Orthodox Jewry. Furthermore, he deliberately chooses to not purchase Ultra-Orthodox-certified kosher food, known under the acronym *badatz*. This can be seen as a form of resistance to the dominant Ashkenazi hegemony, or perhaps it is simply a way of staying true to his family’s centuries-old tradition of observing Judaism in Morocco and Castilla, as he emphasized in the quote above.

#### 4.1.3. Muslim-Jewish Relations

During a Shabbat dinner in January 2019, Haim asked Moïse, as he calls his son Moshe, about his recent trip to Strasbourg. Moshe shared his insights, expressing pride in how the Moroccan ambassador welcomed their group from Israel. He also noted that the Jewish community in Strasbourg seemed to lead a comfortable life. However, he observed that the Moroccan Muslims and Jews in France and Europe, in general, do not mix as one might expect. Moshe found this interesting and suggested that it would be worth analyzing why this is the case.

Moshe’s interest in Judeo-Muslim relations is reflected by him raising this question. He is actively involved in associations that promote these values and is a member of an organization that celebrates the shared history of Jews and Muslims in Morocco. Additionally, he holds a Ph.D. in Jewish Education and is engaged in efforts to incorporate the history of Jews from Arab lands into Israeli school curricula. Moshe’s remark reveals something about his upbringing and his family’s values. He was raised with an idealization of Moroccan Muslim–Jewish relations, and this idealization continues to influence his interactions and beliefs. Thus, for Moshe, wherever Moroccan Jews and Muslims are present, whether in or out of Morocco, cohabitation should be celebrated.

Moshe mentioned that during his association’s activities in Strasbourg, they screened the Moroccan film *Où vas-tu Moché?*<sup>14</sup> which sparked a conversation about Haim’s childhood memories in Morocco. The film opens with a scene of Jews and Muslims praying for rain after a long drought in their region. Haim shared that he attended the prayer of *istisqa’* as a child, where Jews and Muslims pray for rain. Historically in Morocco, Jews lived in separate quarters known as the Mellah, which constituted an autonomous city within the larger urban setting, encompassing all the necessary religious and civil institutions (Miller et al. 2001). The separate quarter also meant separation in terms of religious affairs between Jews and Muslims, demonstrated by the closing of the gates of the Mellah on

Saturdays and during Jewish holidays. Hence, the praying for rain, as a call from the monarch to all his subjects, both Jews and Muslims, is highly significant. Interestingly, this tradition is still practiced in Morocco.<sup>15</sup> According to Haim's narrative, and the general narrative produced by different Moroccan institutions, such encounters show that Jews, just like Muslims, have been esteemed in Morocco by the monarchs.

Haim, the grandfather, is highly respected by both young and old in the family, and his knowledge and expertise on Halakhah matters are sought after by Jews of varying levels of religious observance, which he shares generously with everyone. He is often regarded with a certain reverence and admiration, and his opinions and insights are highly valued. This is mainly the case due to his moderate approach to religion. For instance, during the Pessah *seder* in March 2018, Haim's explanations and biblical elaborations were so enlightening that even the elders of the table turned to him for the final say on certain matters. The table was filled with different *Haggadot* of Passover, including one with a full Moroccan translation that Moshe was using. In this family, knowledge is highly valued and passed down from generation to generation. Everyone is welcome to contribute to the discussion, and it is not uncommon to see books on the table, in addition to the ones that adorn the library's shelves on different floors.

#### 4.1.4. New Family Members

In September 2017, I attended Tslil's wedding with Yoel, who is of Tunisian descent. It was a particularly emotional event for the Azuelos family as it was the first time they stood under the *chuppah* as parents,<sup>16</sup> witnessing their daughter getting married. It was also the first child to move out of the family's home. Tslil and Yoel initially lived in a flat in her grandfather Haim's three-story building in Jerusalem, allowing them to save some money before moving into their own apartment near Jerusalem. They had their first child one year after the wedding.

Following her marriage, Tslil, like many other religious girls, began covering her hair and became *shomeret negi'a*, refraining from touching or shaking the hand of men who are not close family members. Noteworthy, this practice is not observed by her mother or other women in her family. This highlights how Tslil, an Israeli-born Jew, became more religious after starting her own family and adhered to different religious norms, likely influenced by the specific religious education young girls in her social milieu receive. The transition from living in the family's home to establishing one's own family often brings about changes in religious observance and lifestyle.

Two years after Tslil's wedding, Elad's wedding was planned and took place in April 2019. Elad married Yael, an Ashkenazi religious girl from Jerusalem. It was important for Elad and his family to preserve some Moroccan traditions in the predominantly Ashkenazi wedding. As such, they performed a Moroccan piyyut as the bride entered the *chuppah*,<sup>17</sup> and parts of the seven blessings were uttered by the groom's family following the Moroccan rite, including his grandfather Haim. Similarly to Tslil and Yoel, Elad and Yael also moved out of the family home after their marriage. They lived in a town near Jerusalem for a few years, and in mid-2022, they moved to Arad together with their two-year-old son.

In July 2021, the oldest son of the family got married to Talia, a religious girl of Kurdish descent. Uri had previously confided in me that he had never touched a woman before, as part of his religious observance. One year after their marriage, in September 2022, they had their first-born son. During the *Brit Milah* ceremony, which is the circumcision ceremony of Jewish boys, Uri proudly shared that they sang "authentic piyyutim that are no longer sung". He learned these piyyutim with the son of the late Rabbi Meir Atiya, who was one of the leading researchers and teachers of Moroccan Jewish music especially the liturgical one. Uri and his new family currently live in East Jerusalem.

Except for Elad who recently moved to Arad, all the newly married Azuelos children have chosen to live within 10 km of their family's home. This proximity allows them to stay connected with their parents and childhood home, which remains the family's central gathering place. Even though the newly married children have started their own families,

they remain closely tied to their larger family. They continue to travel together, convene for Friday night meals, and celebrate holidays, often spending nights at their parents' home. The Azuelos family is a prime example of the strong bonds that exist between parents and married children within the family unit.

#### 4.2. *The Sissos: "We Became Religious to Protect our Children"*<sup>18</sup>

For the Sisso family, it is a different reality, as they do not observe religion with the same level of zeal as the Azuelos family. They consider themselves to be traditionalist Jews. When I first met Guy (b. 1963) in 2016, it was at a North African/Sephardic synagogue in Ecully (near Lyon) on a Friday night. Guy struggled to follow the prayer on the siddur, a Hebrew prayer book. When he learned that I was alone that Shabbat weekend, he invited me to spend it with his family. As we walked back to his place with another fellow coreligionist, we discussed the situation in France. Both of them expressed deep concern about the rise of antisemitism in France and made it clear that they planned to leave and settle in Israel at some point in the future.

When we arrived at Guy's house, it was a spacious villa with a swimming pool, and luxurious sports cars parked in the garage. As we walked through the glass doors into the living room, Guy kissed the mezzuza,<sup>19</sup> and wished his family "Shabbat Shalom". His daughter was lounging on the sofa, watching television. Guy's wife, Corinne, was in the kitchen making final preparations for dinner. She seemed unsure of my level of "religiousness" and so refrained from shaking my hand. Once we were all gathered around the table, Guy invited me to open the kiddush wine bottle because I "don't drive on Shabbat", implying that I observe Shabbat, which I did at the time. Although the family had a kosher kitchen, such as separating meat and dairy utensils and sinks, they did not observe Shabbat strictly; the television was on, they were constantly on the phone, and the sons would drive into the city to hang out with their friends, which are all forbidden activities on Shabbat.

##### 4.2.1. The Family's New Religious Lifestyle

Two years after our first encounter, the Sisso family made a significant decision to strengthen their Jewish identity by becoming more religious. It was apparent that this was a process that had already begun when I met Guy in 2016 and explains why he was in the synagogue. The decision to become more observant is a significant turning point in their daily life as it represents a serious commitment to follow religious commandments.

Jonathan (b. 1992), the eldest son, began observing Shabbat after marrying Rachel, who comes from a religious family. Eventually, his family, including his parents and siblings, started observing Shabbat and other religious requirements as well. The main reason for their increased observance, as the parents framed it, was to "protect our children", implying a desire to shield them from antisemitism and the fear of assimilation into French society. For Guy, it was essential to maintain the children's *Feuj* identity (a French slang term derived from 'verlan' for Jewish, reflecting a distinctly French Jewish identity) and aligning their lifestyle with the teachings of *Hashem* (lit. The Name, is a religious way to refer to God in Judaism). The fear of assimilation into non-Jewish French society was a genuine concern for the parents.

One Shabbat morning, I chatted with Corinne over coffee. She described herself as a typical Jewish mother who was naturally very concerned about her children, especially the younger ones: Charles (b. 1996) and Sandra (b. 2003). She was extremely worried about the degree of assimilation her family had undergone and insisted that Sandra attend a religious Jewish school. It was important for Corinne that her children have Jewish education and Jewish friends. While this was the official reason for becoming more committed to religious practices, there was another factor at play.

The family attends a North African synagogue in the neighborhood, which is led by an Ashkenazi Chabad rabbi who has had a visible influence on their religious practices. Whenever I went to this synagogue, the same Chabad rabbi would ask me if I was married.

When I replied negatively, he would automatically say, “*Tsadik* (good guy), why is a good young man like you not married yet?” This anecdote illustrates the pressure that some Orthodox rabbis and communities can put on individuals and families.

Over the course of two years, the family’s narrative has shifted to a more orthodox discourse. Guy now believes that “if we don’t pray God will abandon us, we are lucky that He hears our prayers”. Guy, at least when speaking to me, emphasizes the importance of praying, observing Shabbat and Jewish holidays, wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries) every morning, and following *kashrut* (dietary laws). Both parents and children now frequently use the phrase “*C’est peché*” (it is forbidden), especially on Shabbat when their non-religious relatives and friends come to visit. In addition to their constant use of religious language, their holidays and plans now revolve around the Jewish calendar, and they consume only kosher-certified products. They frequently declare “we are *shomer shabbat* (Shabbat observant)” as if they are trying to convince their family and social circles about their new *mode de vie*.

The family members are in fact undergoing a transformation towards orthodoxy, which Olivier Roy (2008) describes as a “born again” process, while Steinsaltz (1982) refers to it as “newborn baby” phase, indicating a re-conversion to religion. As an observer, I have been fortunate enough to witness the various members of the family experience this process and observe how they accept certain aspects of religion while rejecting others. Although the family’s transformation shares similarities with the orthodox meaning of *chazarah betshuva* (Doron 2006), Guy sees himself as on the path of *chozer betshuva*, “but slowly, really slowly. [Our women] don’t put a wig, but we don’t know what life holds for us”. All their children, except for Katia who ironically lives in Israel, now observe Shabbat and they attend synagogue more frequently. While Guy and his sons do not wear a kippa on a day-to-day basis, they do wear it when in Israel. “I am sure that I will be attacked if I go to Lyon with a kippa”, Guy believes. As they adjust to their new way of life, I often heard statements like “you know my dear we cannot go to that wedding on Saturday afternoon, because we are *shomer* (we keep the Sabbath)”. Their increased devotion to their religion has also impacted their family dynamics.

#### 4.2.2. Religiosity and Its Impact on Family Dynamics

During a conversation in April 2018 at Corinne and Guy’s house, the parents and their two sons debated whether to attend their cousin’s wedding. I discreetly took notes on my phone to avoid disrupting the family dispute. The cousin in question is Corinne’s nephew, who is “half-Jewish” because her brother had married a non-Jewish woman. The dilemma was that the wedding was on a Saturday, which is Shabbat. Corinne decided not to go, and she was angry that they didn’t ask for her input when choosing the date. When she initially told them that she won’t be able to attend the wedding because it falls on a Shabbat, her sister-in-law apathetically replied to her that it was not a problem. Guy and Jonathan, however, tried to convince Corinne to attend the wedding, saying the following:

Jonathan: I believe that it is not good to not go.

Guy: Yes, I agree, besides he is really kind.

Jonathan: We just need to organize [vis-à-vis shabbat] (. . .) I think that it is super important.

Guy: (Addressing Corinne) They respect your religion they respect your Shabbat and everything. . .

Corinne: (Shouting) But it does not bother me [Guy interrupts saying “stop shouting”] why are you lecturing me. I don’t care! If I were here [in France] I would have gone. But I am happy that I won’t be here.

Jonathan: Even if he’s not Jewish, he is my first cousin.

Guy: Of course! Besides, he is super nice.

Corinne: Yeah, it is true that he is nice. So, *you* go!

Then, Corinne pointed out that Shabbat ended later due to the longer days of July, and they would arrive at the wedding late. Jonathan reassured her that it would not be a problem, then Corinne reminded them that the wedding started at 6 PM, arguing that they will not be able to make it. Guy answered, "It is doable!" Corinne ended up saying, "You do what you want, I am not going". She then turned to me and calmly remarked with a smile, "I will be enjoying the beach in Tel Aviv that day".

Although this conversation appears to be a simple family misunderstanding, it still embodies the religious aspect of the situation. The family is dealing with the fact that Corinne's nephew is not considered Jewish according to Jewish law, due to his mother not being Jewish. This adds complexity to the family relationships. While Corinne's husband and children would like to show support and love by attending their cousin's wedding, it is clearly still difficult for Corinne to accept her non-Jewish nephew, making it almost impossible for her family to attend because "it falls on Shabbat". Adding to the complication, Corinne feels that her sister-in-law was indifferent to her religious concerns and still planned the wedding on Shabbat. This led to a discussion about the non-observant and non-Jewish side of the family who often organize events on Saturdays. Jonathan's wife, Rachel, remained silent during the discussion but expressed surprise at why they would plan a wedding on Shabbat, as if it should be a given to everyone. Corinne responded that "it is normal for them". The conversation then awkwardly shifted to me, with questions about my wedding plans and whether I wanted to have many children.

Another empirical note to further demonstrate the family's new dynamics occurred when Georges, the grandfather, asked Jonathan for help with something on his phone. Jonathan replied irritably that he could not touch the phone because it was Shabbat, while watching a Lyon–Marseille football match. Georges appeared uncertain whether his grandson was serious or not. He took it lightly and still insisted for Jonathan to help until Georges gave up and asked Jacky, the non-observant uncle, for assistance instead.

In addition to the compromises the Sisso family has made with their non-religious relatives, their home's space has also undergone significant changes. A large portrait of the Lubavitch Rebbe now hangs in the center of the dining room, a *tzedakah* (charity) box is displayed on the kitchen counter, and a Chabad Jewish calendar is affixed on the fridge. Additionally, the *mizuzot* of the whole house have been replaced. Guy informed me that since 2019, rabbis have come to their house to collect charity money. He acknowledges that his family has been influenced by Chabad and that is because "we put our trust in them".

It is interesting to note that this metamorphose has resulted in a gradual distancing from Judeo-Moroccan culture and heritage and a shift towards a more rigid way of observing Judaism. In the past, Guy and his siblings used to participate in *hillolot* (Jewish saint venerations) of Moroccan righteous rabbis organized in Lyon. When I first interviewed Guy in 2017, he described these events as an opportunity to "party and leave a little donation". However, they now refuse to attend such events, considering them to be "superstitious practices" and thus breaking away from a popular tradition of Moroccan Jewry. This shift towards a more homogenized way of practicing Judaism reflects a broader trend of the increasing influence of global religious movements, particularly those of Chabad, on local practices. This tension between religion and culture is not unique to the Sisso family but is a common theme among immigrant communities as they navigate their religious and cultural identities in their new homes.

The Sisso family's discourse is marked by ambivalence. They want to protect their children from assimilation into the dominant secular society by adopting a more orthodox way of life. However, in doing so, they are making their "difference" more conspicuous in that same society and potentially pushing their children towards communitarianism, which is strongly frowned upon in French *laïcité* (Grossmann and Miclo 2002; Zwilling and Guedj 2020). Despite these tensions, Guy and Corinne view the idea of becoming more religious as being closely linked to moving to Israel. This is due to two factors: firstly, as Jews, they feel unwelcome in France, and by becoming more outwardly religious, they may inadvertently contribute to their alienation from the broader society; and secondly,

they believe that their true home is in Eretz Israel. This notion of Jewish displacement from France to Israel is a common theme among French Jews, who often feel caught between two worlds. Overall, the Sisso family's journey towards religious observance reflects both a desire to preserve their Jewish identity and a sense of dislocation within French society.

#### 4.3. *The Abuhasseeras: "In Rissani There Were Almost Only Jews, and They Were All Religious"*

On a Friday night in February 2018, I joined the Abuhasseera family for Shabbat dinner. To my ethnographic contentment, Orel informed me that his Moroccan grandparents, Shaul and Aisha, would be present as well. When I arrived, I conversed with the grandparents in Moroccan Arabic, which appeared to please the rest of the family. Aliza, Orel's mother, updated me about her father Shaul's health condition, noting that he had been forgetting things lately and was in the early stages of Alzheimer's.

A few minutes later, I walked with Shaul to the nearby synagogue for the *Kabbalat Shabbat* (welcoming the Sabbath) service. I tried to engage him in conversation in Arabic and learn more about him, but it was in vain as he could barely remember anything. He did manage to tell me that the synagogue where he regularly prays is just a 5 min walk from his home in Beersheba. When I asked him which synagogue he worships at, he replied as if it were obvious: "Moroccan, of course". Shaul knows all the prayers by heart and hardly uses the prayer book (*siddur*). Some of the worshippers come to greet him and ask about his health, to which he responds with "*Barukh Hashem* (Thank God)". Most of the worshippers at the synagogue are of Moroccan origin, as evidenced by their Moroccan family names. During my regular participations at this particular synagogue, I noticed that the congregants often identify themselves by the city they come from, such as "meknassi" (from Meknes) or "demnati" (from Demnat). Occasionally, they tease each other in Moroccan Arabic using common stereotypes like "*meknassi zekram*" (tight Meknassi) or "*zin elfassi*" (the beauty of Fes).

After returning from the synagogue, the table had already been set. Orel's father, Shlomo, who is of Persian heritage, was the last to arrive. Upon arriving, he took the time to bless his children, from oldest to youngest while holding their head between his hands. Shlomo continued to attend prayers at the previous neighborhood's Moroccan-rite synagogue, which he seems to particularly enjoy. He mentioned that most of his friends are Moroccan and then proceeded to show off some Moroccan phrases he knows.

We began the *Kiddush* (blessing over the wine) while facing the Shabbat candles that had been lit by the women of the house. During the handwashing ritual (*netilat yadayim*), Aisha helped Shaul put on a white Jellaba (a traditional Moroccan tunic), which seemed to be a weekly Shabbat custom. We gathered around a festive Shabbat table with "ten salads", as is the Moroccan tradition. Orel sparked conversation by asking his grandparents if they would like to travel to Morocco. Aisha, the grandmother, was the first to respond, saying that it was not possible due to health issues. Orel's cousin, Tal, asked me if I was from Israel, to which Aisha replied, "No, he's from Morocco", with a smile. She then turned to me and asked whether my parents were planning to move to Israel. Shaul was curious about life in Morocco and whether Jews were happy living there. He responded with nostalgia, reminiscing about his birth city of Rissani in southern Morocco, where "there were almost only Jews, and they were all religious".

The Abuhasseera family has been religious for generations. In Rissani and Tinghir, two traditional rural towns located in the south of Morocco, where Aisha and Shaul were born, observing religion, whether Islam or Judaism, was the general norm. Shaul's statement that "everyone in Rissani was religious" should be examined further. This may have been because people did not have a choice but to be religious or, at the very least, observe religion publicly. In secular societies, however, religion exists as a personal choice (Hervieu-Léger 1999). For the Abuhasseera family, being religious means observing Shabbat, *kashrut*, and celebrating Jewish holidays. However, this does not necessarily mean that they adhere to the orthodox or Charedi definition of religious observance, which will ultimately have an impact on Moroccan Jewry both in the country of origin and in the diaspora.

Orel (b. 1987), the eldest of three children, asserted that their parents never enforced religion on them, implying that their religious beliefs are a matter of personal choice. For him, this is the reason why his family is close to religion, because it was not forced upon them. Orel identifies as a religious Jew (*dati*) and is known in his family for his piety, particularly evident in his prayers, which he recites word-for-word and with great attention to their meaning. Orel adheres strictly to religious customs and lifestyle. For example, he honors the year of the *shmita*, which is the seventh year of the seven-year agricultural cycle mandated by the Torah in the Land of Israel. During our walks, I observed him frequently checking public trash bins. I couldn't help but ask him about this "habit", he explained that he is concerned that a holy book or a document containing the divine name might be thrown away inadvertently and not be given proper respect by being placed in a Genizah.<sup>20</sup> Although, in my presence at least, he has not found any such book or document to be placed in the Genizah, this demonstrates not only Orel's commitment to religion but also to how it has become internalized and turned into a habit.

Orel often gets mistaken for being Arab because of his dark-looking features. In one instance, while riding a taxi in Jaffa city, he responded to the Jewish driver's greeting of "how are you today?" with "*Baruch Hashem*" (Thank God in Hebrew). The driver assumed he was Arab and said, "It's alright you can say *Hamdullah*" (Thank God in Arabic). Orel also shared that he gets mistaken for an Arab when he travels abroad. In his military unit, his colleagues teased him by distorting his name to make it sound more Arab. Although Orel claims that these incidents do not bother him, he feels that his life could have taken a different turn if he had an Ashkenazi name or pursued a different field of study, such as engineering instead of Middle East studies.

Orel is mindful of how he dresses, speaks, and behaves to avoid being identified as an Arab or as an '*ars*', a derogatory slang term that denotes a stereotypical image of low-class Mizrahi people. In the holiday of Sukkot of 2018, I accompanied Orel to the Sukkah of Rabbi Kook, the descendant of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Orel caught Rabbi Kook's attention, who appeared to appreciate him and kept referring to him as "the Mizrahi". We stood out in the gathering as the only tanned individuals, amidst many Ashkenazi-looking guests. Though Orel didn't feel out of place in this setting, he acknowledged the pressure to meet certain expectations and maintain a certain image.

Orel practices strict observance of Jewish law by wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries), praying three times a day, and keeping kosher. However, he intentionally does not wear a kippa on a daily basis to avoid being limited to a particular image and causing "*chilul Hashem*", inadvertent desecration of God's name. Orel is particularly cautious about avoiding "*chilul Hashem*" due to his active sexual life, including dating and viewing sexually explicit content. While Orel's sisters are also religious, they do not strictly adhere to orthodox practices. For example, they may wear pants instead of long skirts, which is the norm for orthodox Jewish women. Additionally, one younger sister lived with her boyfriend in Tel Aviv before getting married, a practice that is not approved of and even frowned upon in orthodox Jewish communities.

Orel's unwavering commitment to his religion and strict observance of kosher practices is exemplified by his behavior after the Jewish holiday of Passover or Pesach. He is particularly concerned about the issue of *Kashrut lePesach*, which dictates that certain bars and restaurants are not considered kosher if they have not sold their *chametz* (leavened food products) before the start of Passover. Orel takes this matter very seriously and is quite peculiar about it. As a young religious traditionalist, Orel often struggles with the issue of Kashrut, especially when he is outside of Israel. This has even discouraged him from studying abroad for a semester during his time as a student. He is reluctant to travel to cities abroad without an orthodox community, such as Chabad, and when he does travel, he brings a suitcase filled with canned tuna and other kosher foods to ensure that he can adhere to his strict dietary restrictions.

In October of 2016, Orel invited me to attend a *hillula* celebration at his maternal grandparents' home in honor of the revered Rabbi and *tsaddik* (righteous rabbi) Yaacov

Abehassira, who lived in the 19th century. The family proudly claims direct descent from this esteemed rabbi and feels it is their duty to commemorate his *hillula* every year. The celebration was filled with joyous Piyyutim (liturgical sung poems), traditional Moroccan music and cuisine, and an ample amount of *mahia*, a Moroccan alcoholic beverage that elevated the mood and led to even more singing and dancing.

Attending this event was an opportunity for me to meet members of the extended family, who introduced themselves based on their city of birth in Morocco, such as, “I am Daniella, I am from Marrakesh”, or “My name is Maurice, I was born in Tinghir”. Shaul, the grandfather, was very ill that year that he could not walk, so the *se’uda* (festive meal) of the *hillulah* was offered for his healing. Orel insisted that I approach Shaul and speak to him in Moroccan Arabic, which was an emotional moment for him as he learned that I come from Morocco. He stood up and gave me a hug, while the entire family looked on with excitement. He spoke to me in Arabic, saying “*weld bladi*” (my fellow countryman). I attended a similar celebration which was held in January 2020. This has been a yearly tradition for Orel’s grandparents since they moved to Israel. Through this *se’uda* that brings together family members and neighbors, the family hopes to receive blessings. A tradition that, along with other religious and cultural practices, was transferred to Israel by Jewish families from Morocco.

Celebrating the *hillula* of Moroccan rabbis in Israel has become a distinct diasporic practice, especially during the 1970s when an increasing number of rabbis were commemorated (Ouaknine-Yekutieli and Nizri 2016, p. 11). Interestingly, this practice is now part of the Moroccan Jewish diaspora, along with other cultural tradition such as Mimuna. For the Abuhassera family, the *hillula* was an important occasion to cheer up and uplift Shaul, the grandfather, who was ill. His children, grandchildren, and other relatives frequently checked on him. Orel informed me that the elderly individuals sitting next to Shaul had been his friends since their days in Morocco, and they continued to keep in touch even after moving to Israel because “they were all thrown into the same *ma’abara*”, Orel jokingly commented. The *hillula* not only serves as a commemoration of the rabbis, but it also brings together family members and friends, providing an opportunity to strengthen communal ties and pass on cultural traditions to future generations.

For the Abuhasseera family, now residing in Beersheva, practicing their faith was the norm in Morocco and continues to be so in Israel. Their religious beliefs and practices are an important part of their identity and have been passed down through generations. Even after moving to Israel, they have held on to their Moroccan Jewish traditions and continue to observe their faith in a similar manner to how it was practiced in Morocco. One such example is their preference to live close to a Sephardic (Moroccan) synagogue in Beersheva, as it helps them maintain a sense of connection to their roots and cultural heritage. For the Abuhasseera family, being able to attend a synagogue that feels “like home” is crucial to their religious practice and sense of belonging. It is through these religious practices and cultural traditions that they maintain their unique identity as Moroccan Jews in Israel.

#### 4.4. The Marcianos: “We Are Not Fanatics”

The Marcianos live in a spacious apartment in Netanya, a coastal city known for being a hub for the French-speaking community in Israel. Elana (b. 1969) constantly speaks of her parents’ modern and open-minded attitudes, which she attributes to their French education. One evening, as we were leaving her parents’ home, Elana shared that her father is not only well read but also a talented musician. She then added, “he is open-minded despite being Moroccan”. Elana seems to view open-mindedness as a trait that is not typically associated with being Moroccan, which may shape her perception of her husband, that she refers to as “the Moroccan”, and his family, who originated from a rural area in Morocco and moved to Israel’s periphery. Elana holds more authority than her husband in their immediate family, and she often emphasizes this point to demonstrate the modernity of her family. Interestingly, being “open-minded” and “modern” extend to the religious domain as well.

The Marcianos do not strictly adhere to Jewish religious practices such as observing kosher dietary laws or observing Shabbat and religious holidays. Although Yosef grew up in a religious family in Kiryat Ata, where Shabbat and kashrut were observed, he became less interested in religion after joining the army. This trend of distancing oneself from religion upon joining the army is observed among many observant Jews in Israel. When it comes to religion, Elana usually describes her family as “we are not fanatics”, arguing again for how modern they are. By declaring that they are not fanatics they, to some extent, position the others, religious Jews, as fanatics. On several occasions, the Marcianos expressed concern about the Charedization (i.e., Orthodoxization) of their city. This is principally due to the growing number of orthodox Jews in Netanya, and the resulting increase in shops and commercial centers closed on Shabbat. From my recurrent observations, many secular Jews in Israel find it alarming that some previously “non-orthodox” cities, such as Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Arad, are becoming more influenced by orthodox practices, leading to a gradual shift in the socio-demographic landscape of these cities. In response to the demographic growth of the ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel, that currently predominantly reside in the cities of Bnei Brak and Jerusalem, the state has been taking action to integrating them into well-established cities (Malach and Cahaner 2018). Such interplay seems to widen the existing gap between the secular and Orthodox components of Israeli Jewish society.

In an email exchange with Yosef dated 18 August 2017, he eloquently wrote in Hebrew regarding his two children’s upbringing that,

They are growing up in a house where the Moroccan culture is emphasized through maintaining the tradition. This is [achieved] through my connections with friends from Morocco, my [frequent] and [Elana]’s visits to Morocco, and the exposure to the history and cultural traditions of Moroccan Jews.

Up to that point, Shay and Shachar were still living with their parents. By using the present tense, “they are growing up”, Yosef suggests that this emphasis on cultural tradition is an ongoing and important aspect of his children’s lives. The mention of family visits and connections with Moroccan friends also suggests that Yosef and his family maintain a strong link to contemporary Moroccan culture, further emphasizing the relevance of their cultural heritage to their daily lives.

In the process of negotiating belonging, Yosef came to the realization that he could maintain Judeo-Moroccan traditions without strictly adhering to religious practices. It remains important for him and his family to observe the traditional aspects of their religion. For example, on Friday nights they perform the *kiddush* (blessing the wine), *netilat yadayem* (the ritual of washing the hands), and bless the bread. Afterwards, they may engage in activities such as watching television or playing musical instruments, despite these practices being forbidden on Shabbat and religious holidays. Moreover, Yosef and his son Shay always make sure to kiss the *mezzuza* when entering or leaving a room. This entails that albeit they do not strictly follow religious commandments, this practice suggests that they still maintain a belief in Judaism. This observation correlates with Hagar Lahav’s (2015, 2021) argument presented in the first section of this paper.

The act of observing certain practices is viewed as way of preserving tradition, and as a continuation of the rituals practiced by parents and ancestors. This logic was likely the driving force behind Shay’s decision to attend Shabbat services at a Moroccan-majority synagogue during his few months stay in the USA, as it allowed him to be part of a community and connect with the “home” culture that he grew up in. These religious practices are not necessarily motivated by religious duty, but rather by a cultural bond. The cultural aspect of the religious practice creates an intermediary space where both religious and non-religious individuals can come together and find common ground (Roy 2008, p. 29).

The Marciano family’s perspective on modernity and open-mindedness can be seen as a reflection of the dominant cultural values of the predominantly Ashkenazi secular society. In this society, being modern is often associated with shedding traditional religious beliefs and practices in favor of a more rational, secular worldview. Elana Marciano and

her family seem to have embraced this idea to some extent, as they refrain from outwardly displaying any form of religiosity despite their adherence to some religious traditions within the private sphere.

Curiously, they do not identify themselves as either secular or religious, but I heard them say that they are more traditionalists. They continue to hold onto some religious traditions, suggesting that their relationship with religion is not entirely based on faith, but also has cultural and familial significance. By maintaining these traditions, they are able to preserve their cultural heritage and connect with their country of origin and ancestors.

#### 4.5. Veronique Chetrit: “I Am Moroccan as Well, Voilà!”

In my early encounters with Véronique Chetrit, I observed that she often spoke about her family’s past life in Fez (Morocco), Israel’s contemporary accomplishments, and the issue of anti-Semitism in France. When it comes to her self-understanding, she uses these terms to define herself:

Regarding my identity which is Moroccan, French and Israeli: [as] I told you; I don’t remember when, that when actually a French asks me, a French person who is not Jewish, asks me who I am, I answer him ‘I am Jewish.’ When an Israeli asks me who I am, I answer him ‘I am French’ [. . .]. When a Jew asks me who I am, I tell him ‘I am Moroccan.’ She stopped, marking the end of her answer. I then asked her: “and when a Moroccan Muslim asks you?” I’m French, and if they want to know more, I am Moroccan as well, voilà! (Translated from French)

The excerpt suggests that one’s self-identity is contextual, and for diasporic individuals like Véronique, there is no fixed or static sense of self. As Young-Oak Lee notes in her writings on Edward Said that the self is in constant transformation, responding to environmental, political, social, and cultural contexts (Lee 2004). Véronique identifies primarily as a Jew in relation to non-Jews, and she distinguishes herself as “Moroccan” vis-à-vis other Jews. Bahloul expresses a similar idea about Algerian Jews who would identify themselves primarily as Jews in relation to non-Jews and differentiate themselves from other European Jews by their Maghrebi interpretation of Jewish tradition (Bahloul 1983, p. 24). Bourdieu’s idea that “social identity is defined and affirmed in difference” (Bourdieu 1979, p. 192) is evident here.

While her three siblings have differing relationships to Judaism—her oldest brother is religious, and her two sisters are not—Véronique identifies as a traditionalist Jew. She quickly added that all her siblings take pride in their Jewish identity. In one of our recorded interviews, Véronique emphasized the importance of adhering to the dietary laws of Judaism and keeping kosher. While she does not observe Shabbat or display a mezzuzah on her apartment door, she feels that conforming to the dietary laws of Judaism distinguishes her from the non-Jewish French society. Véronique views keeping kosher as a defining aspect of her Jewish identity, akin to how the French language and culture define her as French.

To better comprehend Véronique’s decision to adhere to certain Jewish laws, it is important to consider her upbringing. Her parents chose to enroll her, and her siblings, in a republican secular school in Toulouse. Unlike the Sissos, who aimed to shield their children from assimilation into French society, the Chetrits wanted to hasten that very process once they arrived in the metropole. Samuel, Véronique’s father, stated that it was important for him that his children remain attached to their Jewish identity. Therefore, at home, he transmitted the Jewish religion, familiarity with Hebrew, and some Shabbat traditions. Here, we see an instance of a Moroccan-born French Jew who ensured to follow the French principle of *laïcité* by enrolling his children in a secular school, while also preserving his religion within the confines of the private sphere.

Nevertheless, this dual education engendered an “identity crisis” for Véronique. Today, she sees consuming solely kosher food as a way to remember her Jewishness. This often requires making sacrifices, especially in non-Jewish contexts. Eating is a highly social activity that often involves sharing meals with friends and family, such as having aperitif or

family dinners. However, kosher observant Jews tend to avoid such social gatherings that involve non-kosher foods, as is the case with Véronique. Her decision to observe kashrut is a public statement of being dissimilar, an assertion of her distinctiveness in a non-Jewish society where she strives to avoid “fully” assimilating. It is possible that other social factors could play a role in Veronique’s decision to refrain from attending social gatherings.

While observing kashrut is crucial for some members of the researched families, observing Shabbat is not as significant. Consuming kosher food may be understood as part of their familial heritage; it is not entirely observed as a religious obligation. It is a way of perpetuating their family’s traditions, as it underlines both a religious act and an expression of identity. This attachment to family traditions can be detached from religious belief and primarily represents a social manifestation of identity. These practices, such as observing specific Jewish holidays, life cycle events in line with Hebraic religion, and dietary habits, serve to constantly “update the difference between groups” (Zytnicki 1998, pp. 217–65). They establish a “difference” or “distinctiveness” between Jews and non-Jews, as well as among different socio-ethnic Jewish groups, such as Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In short, the attachment to family traditions can exist independently of religious belief and can serve as a means of expressing one’s social identity.

Bourdieu argues that rituals are a means of establishing boundaries between groups. He uses the example of circumcision, which is a ritual act to separate young boys from women and the feminine world. In the same vein, the observance of kashrut, particularly outside of Israel, serves to demarcate Jews from non-Jews. Rituals, in general, play a role in defining social borders that designate specific groups and “signify to someone their identity” (Bourdieu 1982, p. 60). This idea is echoed by Bahloul, who states that dietary practices serve as a mode of articulating the group’s identity (Bahloul 1983, p. 23), uniting them through a shared set of practices. In essence, rituals are symbolic acts that establish a sense of sameness or difference from a particular group.

Diaspora Jews who are not strictly observant but maintain some rituals to preserve their Jewish identity may not feel the same level of obligation to maintain these traditions in Israel. Therefore, it is understandable that Katia Sisso does not observe Shabbat in Israel, whereas in France, it is a significant part of the Jewish heritage and her family’s practice. Similarly, Véronique and other family members feel the need to reaffirm their Jewish identity by adhering to certain Jewish practices, such as keeping kosher, affixing a mezuzah to their doorpost, or wearing a necklace with the Star of David as a symbolic visual.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The Significance of City of Origin in Shaping Family Narratives and Identities

Through close observation of the daily lives and the significant life events of the families, a clear pattern emerged regarding the association of Morocco among the first generation, who were born and raised in the country. For them, Morocco is linked to localized ideas, specific regions, cities, and local family traditions. Phrases such as “my house”, “my childhood home”, “my city”, and “my street” are frequently used by the first generation of Moroccan Jewish immigrants. Their architecture of memory is rooted in concrete places and vivid experiences from their time in Morocco. In contrast, the subsequent generations born in France and Israel have constructed their memories of Morocco based on romanticized and sometimes filtered versions of their ancestors’ firsthand experiences.

Furthermore, Jews of Moroccan origin consider it pivotal to observe life cycle events in accordance with the Moroccan, or the original city’s, customs, particularly with regard to circumcision, weddings, and funeral-related rituals, among others. These ritualized customs and ceremonies serve as constant markers of a religio-cultural belonging where the parents’ or grandparents’ original language, Moroccan Arabic, can still be heard.

The construction and preservation of an ethos of “Moroccan Judaism” is also crucial. It is maintained through the rabbinical and cultural institutions as well as the scholarship of sages (*chachamim*) as an authoritative and scholarly theological reference and considered as a religio-cultural tradition to abide by. Accordingly, it is not uncommon to hear some family

members use phrases like “for us Moroccans”, “in our family’s tradition”, or “in Morocco we used to do it this way” when referring to religious matters. Historian Yigal S. Nizri speaks of “the emergence and preservation of a sense of ‘Morocco’ as a coherent halakhic [Jewish religious law] geography over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Maghrib, and throughout the Moroccan Jewish diaspora, after most of Moroccan Jewry left the physical territory of Morocco” (Nizri 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, Nizri and Ouaknine-Yekutieli noted “the renewed” religious traditions and customs (*minhagim*) among Moroccans in Israel (Ouaknine-Yekutieli and Nizri 2016, p. 3), including the second and third generations who contribute to the revival of these Judeo-Moroccan traditions.

It is noteworthy that this legacy continues to thrive equally in Israel, which is somewhat ironic considering that the Jewish State positions itself in opposition to the diaspora, and often even denies the validity of a Jewish diasporic existence (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, p. 13; Raz-Krakotzkin 2017), let alone within its realm. In fact, cultural studies of the new diasporas cannot overlook Jewishness, as highlighted by the Boyarin brothers (2002). They criticized Stuart Hall’s statement where he “identifies Zionism—the attempt to *negate* Jewish diasporic existence—with Jewish diasporism”, (emphasis in original, Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, p. 13) which explicitly excludes the Jewish experience of diaspora.

Recreating family and cultural customs passed down through generations in new environments presents its challenges. These challenges stem from the inclination of the dominant culture to portray itself as the sole representative of all cultures, seeking to encapsulate and define others within its expansive framework. The power relations between different groups must also be taken into account. In Israel, Jewish immigrants from Morocco were relegated to the bottom of the social ladder and considered inferior by earlier immigrants who attempted to erase their Moroccan cultural practices (Ouaknine-Yekutieli and Nizri 2016, p. 2). Following the independence of colonial North African countries from France—Morocco and Tunisia in 1956 and Algeria in 1961—many French citizens, including Jews with (or in the course of obtaining) French citizenship returned to France as rapatriés, known as Pieds-Noirs, meaning “black feet”, situating them as French first and giving them certain advantages (Bensimon 1969, p. 501). However, not all North African Jews were considered Pieds-Noirs, as those without French citizenship were regarded as “strangers” (*ibid.*). Therefore, we can infer that the persistence of ethnic and religio-cultural groups can be viewed as a form of resistance to the “melting-pot” policy extensively enforced by the young state (Leon 2008) and to the “accelerated assimilation” carried out by the French republic and its missionaries in the country of origin.

### 5.2. Chabadization as a Way of “Returning” to the Religious

Chabad’s spiritual centers are primarily based in New York, with Crown Heights in Brooklyn serving as the movement’s headquarter and a focal point for the Chabad diaspora (Ehrlich 2005). Notably, one of Chabad’s central missions is to provide religious education and services to Jewish communities, reaching them even in remote areas (Friedman 1994, p. 329). Their intention is to help non-observant and light-observant Jews keep the *mitzvot* (commandments) and gradually adopt a religious way of life according to Chabad’s doctrine. Chabad’s success in reaching out to Jews of varying levels of observance highlights their emphasis on bringing fellow Jews closer to their Jewish heritage, and their network of emissaries demonstrates their dedication to spreading their message worldwide. However, their influence on local communities’ practices and approach to Judaism is not left unchallenged.

Chabad places a great emphasis on the teachings and loyalty of the Rebbe: Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (Figure 1), the founder of this orthodox religious movement and the seventh leader in the Chabad dynasty (Friedman 1994, p. 329). Followers of Chabad view the Rebbe as a spiritual role model, with some attributing messianic significance to him. This same rabbi dispatched the first emissary, a couple serving as *shlichim* (emissaries), from Brooklyn to Morocco, and established schools and a synagogue for the Moroccan Jewish community in 1950.



**Figure 1.** A portrait of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson displayed at the entrance of the newly established Beit Chabad in Casablanca. Photo taken by the author in October 2023.

During the mid-twentieth century's mass exodus of Jews from Morocco, Casablanca served as the first stop for Jewish groups coming from other cities and villages, who are on their way to their allocated destinations, mainly to Israel. For the diminishing Jewish minority that remained in the country, the lone Jewish individuals and families who remained in Morocco's hinterland opted to relocate to large metropolitan areas, particularly to Casablanca, in search for community and economic opportunities. Consequently, Casablanca, as the economic capital and a center of cosmopolitan life, rapidly became a hub for contemporary Jewish life in Morocco, passing from 5000 and 6000 in the beginning of the 20th century to about 75,000 Jews in the 1950s (Chetrit 2008, p. 325).

With Morocco's Jewish community beginning to migrate to Israel and to other countries starting in the 1940s, there arose a leadership vacuum, which was partially filled by Chabad emissaries from Brooklyn. These visiting emissaries presented themselves as stricter, thereby gaining religious legitimacy (Paloma-Elbaz 2018, p. 10). Upon the arrival of Chabad Lubavitch emissary Rabbi Yehuda Leib Raskin in Casablanca in 1960, many Moroccan Jews became involved in the practice of Jewish law according to Chasidic custom (ibid.).

Even today, although many of Casablanca's Jews adhere to the teachings and services of the Chabad rabbi, following the Chasidic approach to Jewish law, there are those that resist it. Some members of the community find aspects of the Chabad way of life unsettling. For example, a significant portion of the Casablanca Jewish community chooses not to consume meat sanctioned by the local commission dealing with dietary laws. Instead, they opt for kosher meat imported from New York, adhering to the Ashkenazi Chabad Lubavitch standards for slaughter (Paloma-Elbaz 2018, p. 16). Additionally, given the diversity of Casablanca's Jewish population, originating from various places such as small towns like Sefrou, Demnat, and Debdou, as well as larger cities like Fez, Marrakesh, and Tangier, certain Jewish congregations and individuals, deeply committed to preserving the rite of their ancestors, perceive Chabad's influence as a challenge to their "authentic" practices of prayer or liturgical chanting.

A similar tension can be observed in Bordeaux, where there are two major synagogues: one led by a Chabad rabbi, and the other continuing to observe the Spanish–Portuguese rite in the 18th-century Great Synagogue. This Sephardic congregation is led by a French-born rabbi of Tunisian descent. Similarly to Casablanca, there is tension between the Chabad rabbi and the local community, who perceive Chabad as a threat to their local traditions. Despite this, the Chabad-led synagogue provides more attractive activities and services, attracting more youngsters.

Chabad’s outreach efforts are not limited to areas where there are already established Jewish communities, but also extend to areas where the assimilation rate among Jews is high. Assimilation is seen as a significant threat to the continuity of Jewish identity. Chabad’s “efforts to bring young Jews closer to an orthodox way of life are explained in terms of national identity and the need to prevent assimilation as a national and not necessarily religious Jewish interest” (Friedman 1994, p. 347). We hence note that the national and religious identity are quite intertwined. In Western societies, where assimilation rates are high, Chabad’s proposed services and activities are generally well received and appreciated (ibid., p. 329). As a result, the presence of Chabad in places such as the North African synagogue of Ecully (near Lyon, France) is highly valued by families like the Sissos, who are concerned about preserving their Jewish identity and shielding their children from assimilation.

Many Jewish families who did not grow up with a strong traditional or cultural background, when they choose to become religious, often gravitate towards the generic Chabad movement. Lightly observant Jews and traditionalists constitute good grounds for Chabad, as the movement’s legacy does not constitute in “making Lubavitchers, but in getting a large number of Jews to a greater observance level and consequently to an increased re-identification with Judaism” (Kovacs 1977, p. 174). Chabad’s proselytizing targets fellow Jews of all denominations, backgrounds, and levels of religiousness, encouraging them to adopt a more religious way of life. Chabad sees this as part of a larger mission to prepare for the return of the Messiah through the rebuilding of the third temple. However, some families and Jewish communities, such as the Azuelos family, may resist Chabad’s standardized and orthodox approach to observing Judaism, seeing it as a potential threat to the continuity of their ethnic and traditional Jewish practices.

Chabad also targets non-Chabad synagogues, especially communities that are at the verge of disappearing, as part of Schneerson’s outreach policy (Ehrlich 2005, p. 167). This is supported by Friedman’s observation that during the Maggid’s (preacher) time, the Chasidim began to spread, becoming a mass movement that threatened the traditional way of life of the community establishment (Friedman 1994, p. 330). However, this approach can sometimes create divisions within the community.

Chabad has been successful in attracting young and non-religious Jewish individuals by skillfully inviting them into everyday Chasidic life, as noted by Ehrlich (2005, p. 169). The Beit Chabad, or open-house policy, which is often run by young married couples, provides an opportunity to welcome both observant and non-observant Jews into a friendly setting to expose them to not only the theology but also the everyday practice of Jewish spiritual life. Through these open houses, Chabad provides opportunities for individuals to experience Jewish rituals, traditions, and celebrations firsthand. In summary, Chabad remains an extremely supranational ideology, piloted from the USA with a global presence. The movement’s organizational structure, with a network of emissaries and centers around the world, facilitates the dissemination of Chabad teachings and practices internationally.

## 6. Conclusions

Simon Lévy’s<sup>21</sup> idea that “there is a Moroccan way of being Jewish” (Lévy 2001, p. 21) highlights the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Moroccan Jewish experience. This observation is particularly significant because it acknowledges that Moroccan Jewish practices are not only influenced by the country of origin, but also by the new host societies in which Moroccan Jews have settled. It suggests that, even as Moroccan Jews negotiate

their identity in new contexts, they continue to carry with them an extended cultural and religious heritage that informs their practices and beliefs.

Moreover, the idea of a “Moroccan way of being Jewish” also implies that there are other ways of being Jewish that are not necessarily congruent with the Moroccan experience. This underscores the diversity and complexity of Jewish identity and suggests that it is not a monolithic or homogenous category. Rather, it is a multifaceted and evolving construct that is shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. Consequently, when examining Moroccan Jewish identities within broader classifications like “Sephardi”, “Mizrahi”, “North African”, or even as a distinct Moroccan entity, nuances specific to locality may be overlooked. By homogenizing Moroccan Jewish identity within these larger categories, we may inadvertently neglect the unique historical experiences, customs, dialects, and traditions that have evolved within specific communities over time. By adopting an innovative approach of conducting in-depth and micro-level analysis of the families, we can emphasize the nuances and specificities of each member within the researched families. This illuminates their individual understandings of identity and religiosity, offering valuable insights into the complexity of Moroccan Jewish identity.

In light of these observations, it is clear that the construction and preservation of an ethos of “Moroccan Judaism” is not just a matter of maintaining a connection to the past, but also of adapting to new circumstances and creating new forms of expression. While the first generation of Moroccan-born immigrants continue to preserve a strong sense of a distinctive religio-cultural identity, it is a different reality for the generations born in the country of arrival. The transmitted family traditions and customs from the old country intersect with those acquired in the host society that are mediated through the educational system as well as through religious, cultural, and political institutions.

If we depart from the idea that “religion developed out of the effort of individuals to construct shared meanings and, by extension, a sense of themselves as a part of integrated cultures” (Taylor et al. 1999, p. 525), we come to realize that in the same manner “Moroccan Judaism” has undergone a significant process of transformation, negotiation, and adaptation already in the country of origin, and continues to do so in other societies. These negotiations contribute to reimagining, recreating, and reinventing of traditions and religious practices in, and that are proper to, the new country. Accordingly, there exist “Israeli” and “French” ways of observing Moroccan Jewish practices congruent with their respective socio-political contexts and historical processes.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Middle East Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (on 2 March 2017).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisors, Orit Ouaknine-Yekutieli, Sophie Duchesne, and Haggai Ram, whose guidance and support have been invaluable throughout my doctoral research. I extend my sincere gratitude to André Levy for his invitation to contribute to this special issue of *Anthropological Perspectives on Diaspora and Religious Identities*. I am immensely grateful to each and every participant from the families who graciously devoted their time to answer my questions, respond to my emails, and engage in conversations with me. Their compelling histories and stories continue to inspire me, serving as a constant reminder of the importance and impact of this research.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 Morocco's population is not exclusively composed of Arabs; it also encompasses a significant portion of the Amazigh, the indigenous people of North Africa.
- 2 After conducting brief research on Rabbi Haim Yossef David Azulai's biography, also known as Hida (an acronym of his Hebrew name), it is revealed that he was born in Jerusalem in 1724 during the Ottoman Empire's reign, which means that his clothing would have been similar to that of his contemporaries. Based on Hida's biography, he was the great-great-grandson of Moroccan-born rabbi Abraham Azulai (16th and 17th centuries), and his maternal grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Bialer, was a German scholar. This suggests that Hida had partial Ashkenazi heritage (by today's standards) and may have been influenced by the Ashkenazi school of thought (Azulay 2013; Tsur 2001). Therefore, it would be inaccurate to associate Rabbi Haim Yossef David Azulai with "this is our Morocco", and it is tenuous to argue for an intact, fixed, or pure Moroccan Jewish identity.
- 3 On the Jews of Morocco, see mainly his book *Two thousand Years of Jewish Life in Morocco* (2005), as well as Mohammed Kenbib's *Juifs et musulman au Maroc, des origines à nos jours* (2016). For a broader perspective on Jews in Islamic lands, see historian Norman Stillman's *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (1979).
- 4 In his 2005 article "The 'diaspora' diaspora", Rogers Brubaker argues that it may be more accurate to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, and practices, rather than viewing "a diaspora" or "the diaspora" as a singular, bounded group or ethnocultural fact (Brubaker 2005, p. 13). In the same vein, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin suggest that "diaspora" is becoming more of a category through which certain groups articulate themselves, rather than solely an external category applied to them (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, p. 27).
- 5 See Section 36 (3) of the Defense Service Law in Israel (1986).
- 6 Recent protests have erupted throughout Israel in response to proposed judicial reform by the coalition Likud Party, who were elected in the November 2022 elections. One of the proposed anti-democratic reform components presented to parliament, which has been met with opposition from both the public and opposition parties, is granting politicians more power and reducing the involvement of the High Court.
- 7 As presented in Article 1 of the 4 October 1958, Constitution which is based on the Declaration of 1789.
- 8 For instance, consider the paper by Panou (2013), which offers a critical evaluation of the most influential equivalence theories proposed by scholars in the field.
- 9 Bnei Akiva is characterized as the youth branch of the Religious Zionist movement Mizrachi, established in Palestine in 1922. The movement's motto is: "Sanctify your life in Torah and purify yourself in work". According to the Hebrew version of their website, the goals of Bnei Akiva are twofold: (1) to educate a generation that is loyal and devoted to Torah, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel, and lives for its work in the spirit of the Torah; and (2) to provide education for the personal fulfillment of the idea of "Torah and work", and to strive to establish a society of "Torah and work" in Israel. Additionally, Bnei Akiva seeks to educate its members to live a complete Torah life, to love the entire Jewish people, to love the Land and State of Israel, and to fulfill pioneering roles in the construction and material and spiritual development of the State, with the aim of realizing the vision of a Jewish state built on the teachings of Torah and tradition. Translated from the movement's official website: <https://bneiakiva.org.il/id/> [Hebrew] (accessed on 13 March 2023).
- 10 Our encounters had become recurrent, Elad as well as his male siblings showed keen interest to be interviewed. In a Whatsapp conversation on 4 February 2018, he wrote me "every time you are in Eretz [Israel], I look forward to our meeting". This shows, on the one hand, their awareness of the importance of doing research on the Moroccan Jewish identities in Israel and France. On the other, they appreciate contributing to my doctoral research that included their own family's story and history.
- 11 Note that during Shabbat and religious Jewish holidays, it is forbidden to use technological equipment among others.
- 12 The Tikkun movement, according to their website, strives "to strengthen the presence of traditionalism in the public and educational spheres" (<https://tikun.org.il/elementor-507/>) (accessed on 13 March 2023).
- 13 In Islamic societies, Jews and Christians were expected to follow a particular legal and social status known as dhimma or the pact of Omar. For further information on the significance and consequences of this status, refer to Sharkey (2017), particularly chapter 2, titled "The Islamic Foundations of Intercommunal Relations".
- 14 "Where are you going Moshe?" is a fictional Moroccan film directed by Hassan Benjelloun that explores the theme of Jewish emigration from the rural town of Bejjad in Morocco to Israel.
- 15 In 2014, for instance, the king Mohamed VI of Morocco asked both Muslims and local Jews to pray for rain. This event was covered in both Moroccan and Israeli media. <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2014-01-15/ty-article/morocco-king-asks-jews-pray-for-rain/0000017f-e64d-df5f-a17f-ffdfb8050000>; <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2014/01/119266/moroccan-jewish-community-prays-for-rain> (accessed on 14 November 2022).
- 16 *Chuppah* is a canopy under which the bride and groom stand to perform a Jewish ceremony for the wedding.
- 17 *Shokhenet Bassadeh* is a piyyut by Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gabirol traditionally sung in Moroccan Jewish weddings.
- 18 All my conversations and interactions with the Sisso family members are entirely in French.

- <sup>19</sup> The *mezuzza* is a small case, often made of metal or wood, that contains a scroll with a Hebrew prayer inscribed on it. It is affixed to the doorpost of Jewish spaces and serves as a reminder of God's presence and the importance of the commandments. The mezuzah is often kissed and a blessing recited upon entering or leaving the home.
- <sup>20</sup> In Jewish tradition, holy books and documents containing the name of God cannot be disposed of in the regular manner. Instead, they should be buried in a designated storage area called a Genizah, which is typically located in a synagogue or Jewish cemetery.
- <sup>21</sup> Simon Levy was a Moroccan Jewish activist, a communist militant, and founder of the Jewish Museum of Casablanca.

## References

- Abitbol, Michel. 1994. The Integration of North African Jews in France. In *Yale French Studies (85) Discourses of Jewish Identity in Twentieth-Century France*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 248–61.
- Asad, Talal. 2018. *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Azulay, Yehuda. 2013. *A Legend of Greatness: The Life & Times of Hacham Haim Yosef David Azoulay*. Lakewood: Israel Bookshop Publications.
- Bahloul, Joëlle. 1983. *Le culte de la table dressée: Rites et traditions de la table juive algérienne*. Paris: Éditions A.-M.
- Bell, Daniel. 1987. Modernism Mummified. In *American Quarterly*. Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, vol. 39, pp. 122–32.
- Bensimon, Doris. 1969. L'intégration Économique des Immigrants Nord-Africain en Israël et des Juifs Nord-Africains en France. (Essay of a comparative study). In *Revue Française de Sociologie*. Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, vol. 10, pp. 491–514.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1979. *La distinction*. Paris: Ed. de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1982. Les rites comme actes d'institution. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 43: 58–63. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Boyarin, Jonathan, and Daniel Boyarin. 2002. *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture*, NED-New ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers. 2005. The 'diaspora' diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28: 1–19. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bruner, Jerome. 1990. *Acts of Meaning: Four Lectures on Mind and Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, Jerome. 2001. Self-making and world-making. In *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Buzaglo, Meir. 2008. *A Language for the Faithful: Reflection on Tradition*. Jerusalem: Keter and Mendel Foundation.
- Chetrit, Joseph. 2008. Pour une socio-pragmatique de l'identité socio-culturelle: L'identité judéo-marocaine et sa lente évolution au XXème siècle. In *Coloqne de Fez 2006: Heurs et Malheurs de l'Identité*. Paris: Charles Melman, p. 2006.
- Cohen, Adam B. 2009. Many forms of culture. *American Psychologist* 64: 194–204. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Davis, Uri, and Walter Lehn. 1983. Landownership, Citizenship and Racial Policy in Israel. In *Sociology of « Developing Societies » the Middle East*. Edited by Talal Asad and Roger Owen. Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, pp. 145–58.
- Doron, Shlomi. 2006. Rites of Passage and Personal Definitional Ceremonies: In the Process of "Hazara Betshuvah"—"Hazara Beshe'elah". Ph.D. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.
- Ehrlich, Motti. 2005. *The Messiah of Brooklyn Understanding Lubavitch Hasidism Past and Present*. Brooklyn: Ktav Pub & Distributors Inc.
- Friedman, Menachem. 1994. Habad as Messianic Fundamentalism: From Local Particularism to Universal Jewish Mission. In *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements*. Edited by Marty E. Martin and R. Scott Appleby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 328–57.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gottreich, Emily Benichou, and Daniel J. Schroeter. 2011. Rethinking Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa. In *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Greilsammer, Ilan. 2007. Réflexions sur l'identité israélienne aujourd'hui. *Cités* 29: 39–48. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Grossmann, Robert, and François Miclo. 2002. *La République Minoritaire: Contre Le Communautarisme*. Paris: Editions Michalon.
- Hale, Sondra. 2013. The Memory Work of Anthropologists: Notes Towards a Gendered Politics of Memory in Conflict Zones—Sudan and Eritrea. In *Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa: Into the New Millennium*. Edited by Sherine Hafez and Susan Slyomovics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 1999. Religion as Memory: Reference to Tradition and the Constitution of a Heritage of Belief in Modern Societies. In *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 73–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kenbib, Mohammed. 2011. Muslim-Jewish Relations in Contemporary Morocco. In *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*. Edited by Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Koenig, Alan. 2016. "God Is Near": *American Theocracy and the Political Theology of Joseph Smith*. New York: City University of New York.
- Kovacs, Malcolm. 1977. 'The Dynamics of Commitment': The Process of Resocialization of *Ba'alei Teshuvah*, Jewish Students in Pursuit of Their Identity at the Rabbinical College of America (Lubavitch). Ph.D. dissertation, Union Graduate School, Schenectady, NY, USA.
- Lahav, Hagar. 2015. Post-Secular Jewish Feminist Theology? *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 14: 355–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lahav, Hagar. 2021. *Women, Secularism and Belief: A Sociology of Belief in the Jewish-Israeli Secular Landscape [Hebrew]*. Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press and Hakibbutz Hameuchad.
- Laskier, Michael M. 1983. *The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco: 1862–1962*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Lee, Young-Oak. 2004. Language and Identity: An Interview with Chang-rae Lee. *Amerasia Journal* 30: 215–27. [CrossRef]
- Leon, Nissim. 2008. Ethnic Synagogues of Mizrahi Jews in Israel: Ethnicity, Orthodoxy, and Nationalism. In *Sociological Papers: Between Tradition and Modernity: The Plurality of Jewish Customs and Rituals*. Edited by Larissa Remennick and Ana Prashizky. Ramat Gan: Sociological Institute for Community Studies, Bar-Ilan University, vol. 13, pp. 6–21.
- Lerner, Daniel. 1958. *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. New York: The Free Press.
- Lévy, Simon. 2001. *Essais d'Histoire et de Civilisation Judeo-Marocaines*. Rabat: Centre Tarik Ibn Ziyad.
- Loupo, Yaacov. 2006. *Métamorphose Ultra-Orthodoxe chez les Juifs de Maroc: Comment les Séfarades sont Devenues Ashkénazes*. Translated by Tirtsia Kauders-Bing. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Malach, Gilad, and Lee Cahaner. 2018. *Statistical Report on Ulтура-Orthodox (Haredi) Society in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Insititute.
- Maykut, Pamela, and Richard Morehouse. 1994. *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*. London and New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Miller, Susan Gilson, Attilio Petruccioli, and Mauro Bertagnin. 2001. Inscribing Minority Space in the Islamic City: The Jewish Quarter of Fez (1438–1912). *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60: 310–27. [CrossRef]
- Nathan, Tobie. 2017. *Les Âmes Errantes*. Paris: L'Iconoclaste.
- Neher, André, and Renée Neher. 1964. Le judaïsme nord-africain en France, nécessité d'une culture juive de masse. In *Hamoré*. June.
- Nizri, Yigal S. 2014. *Sharifan Subjects, Rabbinic Texts: Moroccan Halakhic Writing, 1860–1918*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, New York, NY, USA.
- Ouaknine-Yekutieli, Orit, and Yigal S. Nizri. 2016. 'My Heart is in the Maghrib': Aspects of Cultural Revival of the Moroccan Diaspora in Israel. In *Hespéris-Tamuda LI (3)*. Rabat: Mohamed V University.
- Paloma-Elbaz, Vanessa. 2018. Kol b'Isha Erva: The Silencing of Jewish Women's Oral Traditions in Morocco. In *Gender and Law in the Maghreb*. Waltham: Brandeis University, pp. 263–89.
- Panou, Despoina. 2013. Equivalence in Translation Theories: A Critical Evaluation. In *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. Helsinki: Academy Publisher, vol. 3, pp. 1–6. [CrossRef]
- Ranger, Terence, and Eric Hobsbawm. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raz-Krakotzkin, Amnon. 2017. Exile Within Sovereignty: Critique of 'The Negation of Exile' in Israeli Culture. In *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept*. Edited by Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos and Nicole Jerr. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 393–420.
- Røislien, Hanne Eggen. 2013. Religion and Military Conscription: The Case of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). *Armed Forces & Society* 39: 213–32.
- Roy, Olivier. 2005. *La laïcité face à l'islam*. Paris: Éditions Stock.
- Roy, Olivier. 2008. *La Sainte ignorance: Le temps de la religion sans culture*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Schroeter, Daniel J. 2008. The Shifting Boundaries of Moroccan Jewish Identities. In *Jewish Social Studies*. New Series 15 (1) Sephardi Identities. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 145–64.
- Sharkey, Heather J. 2017. *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sharot, Stephen. 1996. Jewish Acculturation in Premodern Societies. In *Jews among Muslims Communities in the Precolonial Middle East*. Edited by Shlomo Doshen. New York: NYU Press.
- Shenhav, Yehouda. 2006. *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Shohat, Ella. 2017. *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings*. London: Pluto Press.
- Shokeid, Moshe. 1980. Principales Orientations de Recherches Consacrées en Israël au Juifs d'Origine Marocaine. In *Juifs du Maroc: Identité et Dialogue*. Grenoble: La Pensée Sauvage.
- Steinsaltz, Adin. 1982. *Teshuvah: A Guide for the Newly Observant Jew*. New York: Free Press.
- Stillman, Norman A. 1995. *Sephardi Religious Responses to Modernity*. Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publisher.
- Taïeb, Jacques, and Claude Tapia. 1972. Portrait d'une communauté. *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 29: 49–62.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Robert Joseph, Jacqueline Mattis, and Linda M. Chatters. 1999. Subjective Religiosity Among African Americans: A Synthesis of Findings From Five National Samples. *Journal of Black Psychology* 25: 524–43. [CrossRef]
- Tsur, Yaron. 2001. *Kehilla keru 'a: Yehude Maroko vaha-le 'umiyut, 1943–1954*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
- Zafrani, Haim. 2005. *Two Thousand Years of Jewish Life in Morocco*. New York: Sephardic House.
- Zytnicki, Colette. 1998. *Les Juifs à Toulouse entre 1945 et 1970: Une Communauté Toujours Recommencée*. Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Midi. [CrossRef]
- Zwilling, Anne-Laure, and Jérémy Guedj, eds. 2020. *Réalité(s) Du Communautarisme Religieux*. Paris: CNRS éditions.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.