

Mishpatim 2017 - After Morocco

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 2/25/17

Shabbat Shalom. It's great to be back with all of you after our Beth El Moroccan adventure. Twenty five of us went to discover the Jewish history and culture of this fascinating country. Our trip was organized by an Israeli travel agency, and we were guided by both an Israeli guide, Michal, and a Muslim Moroccan guide, Fetah. Both were fabulous (pictured below). Jewish history in Morocco dates back over 2000 years. Legend has it that Jews originally arrived fleeing the Roman conquest of ancient Judea. Later, they came as traders and merchants crossing North Africa and the Sahara desert and settling in the Atlas Mountains among the Berber people in areas we visited.

Less than 70 years ago, there were over 250,000 Jews living mostly in the royal cities, all of which we visited, too: Casablanca, Rabat, Fez and Marrakesh. They lived in the old walled cities known as the Medina, in neighborhoods of tangled streets known as the Mellah. Beginning in 1948, with the founding of the State of Israel, and especially in the 1960s Jews left Morocco in large numbers (many for economic opportunity elsewhere like France and Canada) and today the Jews of Morocco number only about 3,500, mostly in Casablanca. Nonetheless, the Jews who do live in Morocco have a vibrant Jewish community. Casablanca is home to synagogues and schools, and a large kosher restaurant that we feasted in, which also serves as the JCC. Significantly, Casablanca also is the home to the only Jewish museum in an Arab country.

In Fez, in the Old Mellah in the Medina (which reminds one of the Old City in Jerusalem) we experienced the Golden Age of Moroccan Jewry from the 9th-11th centuries as we stood outside the home of Maimonides, across the way from a Madras, a Muslim house of study that Rambam must have known well. He is revered in both Jewish and Muslim traditions, and Rambam wrote all his philosophical works in Arabic. There are two shuls there in Fez and we visited both, bringing Jewish prayer back to the ancient houses of worship. It was thrilling to daven where so many generations of Moroccans celebrated Jewish life. We didn't know them, but we could imagine what it felt like to celebrate their b'nai mitzvah and auf rufs, and to mourn family members there, all in the context of Jewish community just as we do at BE. We also visited the ancient Jewish cemetery and felt the aura of Jews who lived meaningful spiritual lives in that city over the centuries.

Marrakesh was once the historical hub of Jews but today numbers less than 100. Nonetheless we davened with the locals in both of the active synagogues, on Friday night and Shabbat morning. Shabbat morning last week was especially powerful when we davened in the Laazama Synagogue which has been in operation since 1492. Not only is it beautiful, with its inner courtyard and sanctuary made of mosaic tiles, but it had special meaning for us as a group because we had had Shabbat dinner the night before in the home of the man who has made it his personal mission to restore and maintain that shul (or "Slah" in Arabic), for nearly 40 years. The Jews of Morocco take such pride of ownership in all that goes on there and we were warmly welcomed.

But it's not just the Jews who are warm and welcoming. I found that the Muslim natives welcomed us as well. I did not sense any anti-Semitism, nor hear about it from the Jews we met. In fact, there is a level of cooperation between the Jewish and Muslim community that should be a model for all countries. Years ago, when the Jews of Marrakesh left in large numbers, the local municipality began to change the street names of the Jewish quarter into more generic, Arabic names. But when the King decided to gentrify the old city, including the Mellah, and make it more welcoming to tourists, the remaining Jews made it known to the King of their disappointment that the street names no longer reflected their Jewish heritage.

And you know what the King did? Working with the Jewish community, he had the streets renamed this year back to their Hebrew original, and we saw the brand new signs he had put up (pictured below).

In fact, Jews and Muslims are working together in Morocco to preserve Jewish heritage; working together to promote Jewish tourism. And when I thought about those shared efforts, it reminded me of a section of our Torah portion we read today. The Torah states in Parashat Mishpatim (23:5), "If you see your enemy's donkey crouching under its load, and you would abstain from assisting him - you shall surely assist him." Onkelos, a famous Torah commentary, translates the final clause in the phrase to mean, "You shall surely abandon what is in your heart about him, and unload with him." According to this rendition, the Torah admonishes the individual to "leave" or "abandon" his feelings of animosity towards the animal's owner and offer him assistance, thus, working together for the common good. Helping is not enough; one must help without any resentment or ill will. Working together is what builds and rebuilds trust and community.

I thought of this verse and its interpretation when I read about the Muslims who have raised funds to help restore the desecrated cemetery in St. Louis. I later learned that some of the money raised will also be used to repair the Mt. Carmel cemetery in Philadelphia. Those gestures go a long way in my book. Wouldn't be great if we could have Jewish and Muslim teens work together to actually clean up the cemetery in Philadelphia, or work together cleaning up when a mosque is desecrated as was the case in Bayonne this past October?

I think that this verse in Mishpatim has it right. Dialogues about theology and belief may be helpful. But, more helpful still will be shared projects that get people of all ages and religions, particularly our youth, working together, helping one another for common good. This kind of shared efforts puts the highest ideals of Judaism and Islam (and Christianity) into action and helps people to break down stereotypes, labels, and fear. The good people of this world, and of our community, far outnumber those who hope to instill fear and suspicion, and working together we can overcome both. As a congregation and as a community we need to strategize and create opportunities that bring us all together and optimize the goodness that Gd has put in each of our souls.