

Jews and Berbers

Dr. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Senior Research Fellow

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

History, myths, legends and contemporary political agendas have combined to produce a fascinating picture of the relationships between Berbers and Jews throughout the ages. There can even be surprises. For example, in a conversation with a Moroccan Berber activist, I quoted a scholar who wrote, "Scratch a Moroccan, Find a Berber." He suggested an addendum: "Scratch a Berber, Find a Jew!"

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the "truth" of Jewish-Berber relationships in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, just as there are no definitive conclusions regarding the origins of the Berbers. What is known is that Jewish communities existed in North Africa at least since Second Temple times, and perhaps even earlier. As such, they interacted with the rest of the population, mainly in the coastal towns, but also beyond. The ancient city of Carthage (near modern day Tunis), was founded in 813 BCE by Phoenician merchants, and the Punic language was deeply rooted well into even the first centuries of the Christian era. The "Phoenician connection" undoubtedly shaped the popular belief of the Berbers' Semitic origins, making the Berbers cousins of the Jews (and Arabs) by virtue of race and language. Religion would subsequently enter into the picture as well. A further addition to the mixture of myths and legends is the fact that to this day, Jews and Moslems venerate the tomb of Joshua in Tlemcen, in western Algeria, where he is said to have died after warring in the Maghreb.

Religious belief and praxis in North Africa during the late Roman and early Christian eras was highly syncretistic, often combining elements of Judaism, paganism and Christianity. Jewish, as well as Christian proselytization was common. According to the great 14th century Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun, Jewish proselytization had its greatest success with nomadic Berber tribes in the mountains of the central Maghreb (today's Algeria), and farther West.

The Muslim conquest of North Africa west of Egypt began in the late 7th century. One of the most famous episodes/myths of resistance to the conquerors is the story of the Kahina ("priestess/sorcerer"). According to Ibn Khaldun and earlier Muslim historians, the Kahina was the leader of what may have been Judaized Berber tribes in the Jerawa and Aures mountains who fought long and valiantly before succumbing. The mythical Kahina has since been adopted as a symbol, in turn, by French colonialists, Algerian nationalists, Jewish nationalists, feminists and Berberists, while also winning the grudging respect of Muslim Arab historians.

The number of Judaized Berbers, and the percentage of North African Jews who are descendants of Berber converts cannot be ascertained, and is a subject of disagreement. In any case, over the centuries, nearly all Berbers were Islamicized. Still, many Jews lived amongst, and in proximity to Berber communities, mostly in Morocco, and in some areas of Algeria and Tunisia. According to a Moroccan census

of 1936, three-quarters of Morocco's 161,000 Jews were bi-lingual in Berber and Arabic, and another 25,000 were exclusively Berber speakers. As merchants, traders and small artisans in the Atlas mountain villages, Jews may have played an intermediary role between Arabs and Berbers, and between different Berber tribal groupings. As is generally true in North Africa, relations between Jews and Berbers are sometimes presented in overly idealized terms.

According to the late Prof. Haim Zafrani, "Judaeo-Berber" was used not only in familial situations but also constituted, along with Hebrew, the language of culture and traditional instruction, and was used in the elucidation and translation of sacred texts, like Judaeo –Arabic or old Castilian. Certain prayers, such as the benedictions of the Torah, were said in Berber (*Tamazight*); some Biblical texts were rendered in Berber, and there even exists a Haggadah in *Tamazight*, transcribed in Hebrew characters. Today, apart from a minute number of elderly "Berber Jews" living in Israel, there are no more Berberephone Jews.

Contemporary activism in the "Berber/*Amazigh* Culture Movement" has a Jewish/Israeli angle. Many *Amazigh* activists express open admiration for the Zionist project, i.e., the revival of a national language and the successful assertion of ethno-national rights in the face of an intolerant Arab world.. Berberist militants view Arab-Islamic nationalism, the dominant ethos of the all of the Maghreb states, as the source for many of their community's woes. Often they complain that their governments spend an inordinate amount of energy on behalf of the Palestinian cause, at the expense of the real needs of their societies. In one southeastern Moroccan Berber town, an annual masquerade ritual, has been transformed among the youth into an expression of *Amazigh* activism and militancy, rejecting Islamist discourse and identifying with Judaeo-Berber culture and even Israel.