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Josh Kadish
University of Pennsylvania

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Pardon My French: The Vitality of Judeo-Arabic as a Litmus Test for the State of Jewish Well-Being and Identity

Josh Kadish

“Those who don’t speak Yiddish are not Jews,” Golda Meir, the fourth Prime Minister of the state of Israel, remarked in an epithet that elevated European Jews to superiority and invalidated the existence of non-European Jews on the basis of linguistic tradition.¹ History has proven her wrong on the vitality of Yiddish, as demonstrated by the revival of the Hebrew language in the modern state of Israel, but the statement validates the link between Jewish identity and diasporic Jewish languages. The history of the Jewish people can be evaluated through the lens of language, from the usage of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic in ancient Israel to the official language debates in the early history of the modern state of Israel. The association between language and identity is largely a consequence of the historical diasporic nature of the Jewish people. This link is most emblematic in the language of Maghrebi Jews who inhabited the region of North Africa for centuries and, over time, developed the language of Judeo-Arabic.

The Arab invasion in North Africa during the late seventh century CE transformed Maghrebi society through Islam and the Arabic language. The conquest placed the region under Islamic jurisdiction and, as a result, the Jewish inhabitants became *dhimmis*, meaning “protected people.” The

Jewish people were permitted to continue practicing their religious tradition and maintained autonomy over their communities, as the legal recognition of this internal autonomy allowed for communities to establish, as well as maintain, a communal structure.² Most Maghrebi Jewish communities were separated from non-Jews, yet despite those barriers, there was still a great deal of communication and contact. Thus, Maghrebi Jewry quickly adopted the Arabic language while maintaining usage of Hebrew script and incorporating Hebrew and Aramaic vocabulary. As the communities and language developed, the vernacular of Maghrebi Jewry evolved into a distinct language, although with many variants, known as Judeo-Arabic.

This paper will examine and defend Judeo-Arabic as a sociolinguistic litmus test for the state of Jewish well-being and identity in Islamic Maghrebi society, specifically focusing on the shift to French among Moroccan Jews during the 19th and 20th centuries. This study will draw upon works exploring the historical, social, and political developments of the North African Jewry and the linguistic development of Judeo-Arabic. These sources include historical and sociocultural works focusing on Maghrebi Jews, in contrast with Sephardic Jews who spoke Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, and sociolinguistic analyses of Judeo-Arabic and Arabic multiglossia. These works demonstrate the vitality of Judeo-Arabic relative to Jewish welfare and identity, thus confirming the significance of Judeo-Arabic as indicative of the state of Maghrebi Jewry.

First, this paper will establish the Jewish community of the Maghreb in a historical context. This will present the framework of Islamic societies in the Maghreb and will reveal the impact, societally and linguistically, that the advent of Islam had on the Maghreb. In the second section, this paper will delineate the development of Judeo-Arabic, from its origin within the Arabic multiglossia and throughout its linguistic developments. The linguistic developments of Judeo-Arabic will be juxtaposed with historical, political, and social developments that occurred concurrently. In the third section,

this paper will focus on Moroccan society and will describe and analyze the relations between Jews and Muslims specific to Morocco in order to establish a narrowed focus in determining sociolinguistic significance in Maghrebi Jewry. By focusing on Moroccan society, this paper will focus on a specific linguistic transition within a particular society. Thus, the fourth section will examine the linguistic transformation from Judeo-Arabic to French that took place across Moroccan society among Maghrebi Jews. Through a study of the social, cultural, political, and historical developments that occurred in the Maghreb, with particular attention on Moroccan Jewry, it is evident that Judeo-Arabic serves as an indicator for the state of Jewish well-being and identity in Islamic North African societies.

I. Jews in the Maghreb

The twentieth century witnessed worldwide Jewry, specifically in Europe and the United States, turn towards “the forgotten million” of North Africa “who were suddenly discovered and who now became one of the last important segments of world Jewry.”³ This ‘discovery’ of Jews in the Maghreb occurred following centuries of Jewish, as well as European, presence in North Africa. The Jewish people of North Africa have a complex history that must be understood in order to comprehend the significance of Judeo-Arabic relative to Jewish identity and welfare.

First, it must be understood that Jewish existence in the Maghreb preempts Islam. While it is difficult to point to the exact arrival of the Jews in the Maghreb, the history of the Jewish people in Carthage is well-recorded. Carthage was founded in 813 B.C by “the oldest and most tenacious colonizers of the Mediterranean, the Jews and Phoenicians of Palestine.”⁴ The Phoenicians, in fact, recorded that “the Jews were well established and prosperous in commerce and agriculture.”⁵ Scholars believe that the influx of Jews to the Maghreb occurred following the destruction of Jerusalem in approximately 586 B.C. and, again, after the second destruction of Jerusalem

in 70 A.D. The Jewish people, prior to the Islamic conquests in North Africa, enjoyed stability, security, and prosperity in the region, establishing the Maghreb as a destination for persecuted Jews. These persecuted Jews brought with them “a new impetus to the growth and importance of North African Jewish communities from Tangiers to Carthage.”⁶ Thus, the “forgotten million” were a staple of the Maghreb prior to the societal transformation under Islam.

The advent of Islam and the Arab invasions in the seventh and eighth centuries set the foundation for Jewish life in Maghrebi Islamic societies, where there was no distinction “between religion and the state.”⁷ Jews and Christians living under Islamic law were conferred the status of *dhimmis*, meaning protected persons, establishing their protected yet subservient positions in society. Jews and Christians, who had lived in the Maghreb for centuries, were now “viewed as strangers who had the right to live in a Moslem country only if they paid the extra yearly tax and agreed to live under somewhat humiliating restrictions.”⁸ One example of these restrictions is in Morocco, where Jews were required to “remove their shoes and walk barefoot when out of their quarters,”⁹ known as *mellabs*. Despite their inferior position in society, Jews were permitted autonomy over their communities and institutions, allowing them to freely practice their religion and to educate their children in their own religious institutions.¹⁰ The dominance of Islam transformed the structure of society and the Jewish organizational apparatus, introducing a hierarchical system that established Muslims as superior vis-à-vis the Jewish population.

The Islamic societies of the Maghreb elevated Arabic to linguistic superiority and, consequently, it spread among North African Jewry. The usage of Arabic, especially in the synagogue, resulted in “the emergence of a special language, a mélange of Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic.”¹¹ This vernacular, known as Judeo-Arabic, became increasingly popular among the Jewish population. While it does demonstrate efforts to assimilate,

the invention of Judeo-Arabic is a representation of the “deliberate self-segregation from the Arab-Muslim majority”¹² as it exemplifies the simultaneous belonging to and separation from Islamic Maghrebi society. Jews were not isolated from their Muslim counterparts in all aspects of society, but Jewish life remained at the fringes of Islamic Maghrebi societies with restrictions on daily life, including living quarters and economic activity.¹³ The most significant trend of Islamic Maghrebi societies was that “isolated pockets where Jews could breathe in relative peace and security had become progressively rarer.”¹⁴ The dominance of Islam forced the Jewish population into a subservient position in society that defined relations between Jews and Muslims in precolonial Maghrebi life.

The relations between Jews and Muslims in the Maghreb fluctuated between peaceful coexistence and conflict. While “under normal circumstances, Jews and Muslims lived together in peace, if not harmony,”¹⁵ Jewish well-being was greatly dependent on circumstances. There is no single paradigm nor model of behavior to describe and analyze relations between Muslims and Jews in the precolonial Maghreb; the common theme of these relations was that “Jews always deferred to Muslims – but the essence of Jewish-Muslim relations has been variability: the accommodation of behavior to the prevailing circumstances.”¹⁶ Thus, the vitality of Judeo-Arabic will be employed as a litmus-test to analyze the state of Jewish well-being and identity in Islamic Maghrebi societies, with a specific focus on Morocco and the linguistic revolution that took place among Moroccan Jewry, dramatically and rapidly shifting their linguistic tradition from Judeo-Arabic to French.

II. Judeo-Arabic: Origins, Divergence, and Development

The language of the Jewish people has historically been in a state of flux, a consequence of the diasporic state of worldwide Jewry that forced these communities to adapt to the societies within which they existed. The languages that arose among these Jewish communities are known as Jewish

languages, which are defined as languages that “develops in the diaspora from a local language or local languages and is used both in its written and spoken forms by Jews within the Jewish community.”¹⁷ Jewish languages serve as a bridge between maintaining a cohesive, communal Jewish identity and assimilating into the surrounding non-Jewish environment. These languages developed due to Jews’ desire to integrate into society by adopting its dominant language, while also acting as a symbol of Jewish identity through the incorporation of Hebrew script and vocabulary. Thus, Jewish languages act as indicators of synchronous assimilation into and distinction from the non-Jewish neighbors of these Jewish communities.

Judeo-Arabic has special sociocultural and linguistic significance as it was employed by Jews across the Arab world. The linguistic tradition of Judeo-Arabic, both oral and written, existed in various forms and dialects since prior to the emergence of Islam and spanned a vast geographic area from Spain to Yemen to Iraq. Judeo-Arabic was “the medium of expression for one of the foremost periods of Jewish cultural and intellectual creativity,”¹⁸ signifying symbiosis between Jews and Muslims in the Arab world. The study of Judeo-Arabic is conducted through its linguistic developments, which are divided into five main periods: Pre-Islamic Judeo-Arabic, Early Judeo-Arabic, Classical Judeo-Arabic, Later Judeo-Arabic, and Modern Judeo-Arabic.¹⁹ The linguistic progression of Judeo-Arabic serves to demonstrate its origin within and divergence from the Arabic multiglossia, as well as to exemplify its association with Jewish identity within the Arabic-speaking world.

First, it is necessary to establish the origin of Judeo-Arabic within the context of the Arabic multiglossia. Multiglossia is a linguistic state in which there are different varieties of a language that are used under different circumstances with various functions. Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic are considered to be two discrete varieties of Arabic, acting as the two ends of a continuum describing Arabic multiglossia.²⁰ The nature and development of Arabic has allowed for diversity within the language, making it possible

for the ethnolect of Judeo-Arabic to emerge and evolve into its own distinct language. The Judeo-Arabic of the Maghreb, in the context of the Arabic multiglossia, developed from Middle Arabic. Middle Arabic developed as a result of the Arab conquests during the seventh century and originated among the lower-strata of the indigenous urban population.²¹ It is very likely that Jews were among the earliest speakers of Middle Arabic in the Maghreb as it was “the most natural and effortless thing to do.”²² This embrace of the dominant language has historical precedence among Jewish peoples as evidenced by the fact that “even Aramaic, the second holy language of Jewry, was not their specific speech.”²³ Jewish communities viewed linguistic developments as “a natural process affecting everyone, irrespective of religion or nationality,”²⁴ which enabled the Jewish community in the Arabian Peninsula to develop the first variant of Judeo-Arabic prior to the emergence of Islam. Pre-Islamic Judeo-Arabic did not develop linearly into the Judeo-Arabic of the Maghreb but presents the first instance of a Jewish community incorporating Hebrew script and vocabulary into the Arabic language, which are the two defining features peculiar to Judeo-Arabic.

The foundation for Judeo-Arabic in the Maghreb was Early Judeo-Arabic, which was a direct linguistic consequence from Middle Arabic and provided the foundation for further development of the ethnolect. The Maghrebi Jewish community adopted Arabic, the dominant language, while incorporating Hebrew script and Hebrew and Aramaic vocabulary. This early variant of Judeo-Arabic is nothing more than “a deficiency in the mastering of Classical Arabic,”²⁵ following the pattern when “a language enjoying religious, social, and other prestige collides with an inferior one,”²⁶ as “the authors of Judeo-Arabic texts endeavored, not always successfully, to use the forms of the higher language and to avoid those of the vernacular.”²⁷ Since Arabic as a multiglossia allows for this linguistic corrupting, Judeo-Arabic was capable of developing into a language in its own right. The development and usage of Early Judeo-Arabic in the seventh to ninth centuries demonstrates the Jewish

population's assimilation, both by choice and by force, into the new Islamic society, while also maintaining their Jewish identity.

Judeo-Arabic became institutionalized as the linguistic tradition of Maghrebi Jewry after the translation of the Torah into Judeo-Arabic, which marked its development into Classical Judeo-Arabic. The usage of the Classical Judeo-Arabic vernacular spanned from the tenth through fifteenth centuries, which was a period characterized by tumultuous relations between Jews and Muslims. With regard to the linguistic developments of Judeo-Arabic, "the appearance of Sa'adya ibn Yosef al-Yayyumi's translation of the Pentateuch into Judeo-Arabic"²⁸ marked the beginning of the written tradition of Judeo-Arabic, which was done in Hebrew script, as it had been largely orally based. This period saw a proliferation of works written in Judeo-Arabic and focusing on "theology, philosophy, biblical exegesis, philology and grammar, law, ritual, and literature, in addition to commercial and private correspondence."²⁹ In fact, the literary production in this period of the development of Judeo-Arabic exceeded the number of Judeo-Arabic works in each of the other periods, demonstrating the level of cultural and intellectual flourishing among Maghrebi Jewry that occurred throughout the tenth to fifteenth centuries.³⁰ This widespread usage of Judeo-Arabic, as well as the corresponding expansion in literary production, demonstrates the efforts of Maghrebi Jews to assimilate in the face of discrimination.

The vitality of Classical Judeo-Arabic corresponds with unpredictable and rapidly changing relations between Jews and Muslims in Morocco. The twelfth century had forced conversions and executions of Jews, likely influencing Jews to integrate linguistically through adopting Judeo-Arabic in order to assimilate while maintaining their Jewish identity. The state of the Jewish people, following the end of the rule of Almohades in 1296, improved and led to a relatively peaceful coexistence alongside Muslims. This harmony lasted until the fifteenth century when Jews were segregated into *mellahs* in the major cities across Morocco. Despite this segregation,

it was not uncommon for the sultan to appoint Jews to various positions of power. The end of the century brought about an influx of thousands of Jews who fled persecution in Spain and found refuge in Morocco.³¹ The sociopolitical developments of Moroccan Jewry correspond with the vitality of Classical Judeo-Arabic insofar as it is representative of Jewish efforts to assimilate linguistically with Islamic culture. Additionally, the dramatic increase in literary production can largely be attributed to the migration of Sephardic Jews seeking refuge from persecution in Morocco. The presence of the educated Sephardic Jews in Morocco brought about a new phase in the linguistic development of Judeo-Arabic and further strengthened the vitality of Judeo-Arabic as the premier Jewish language.

The period of Classical Judeo-Arabic further entrenched it as the linguistic tradition of Maghrebi Jewish culture, producing the largest literary canon written in Judeo-Arabic, but the Later Judeo-Arabic period, spanning from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, saw the popularization of the language among Maghrebi Jewry, as well as its subsequent fall from favor. The most significant linguistic development of this period was a result of the development of the *šarh*. The *šarh* is a translation of Hebrew sacred text into Judeo-Arabic that “filled essential needs, assuring children a basic education and providing the general Jewish public, who did not comprehend Hebrew and/or Aramaic, with proper education.”³² The *šarh* popularized Judeo-Arabic, providing an accessible translation of sacred Jewish texts to the general population, in contrast with the literary production of the past that was aimed at the elite intelligentsia of Jewish society. This is further validated by the fact that extensive folk literature, in addition to “historical, *halakhic*, liturgical and other texts ... aimed at the general public and not only at the elite, were written” towards the end of the Later Judeo-Arabic period.³³ The popular usage of Judeo-Arabic as the preferred language is indicative of the Jewish community’s standing within Maghrebi society, as Arabic was necessary not only for acceptance and assimilation but, more importantly, for economic

prosperity. The shift that occurred in the Later Judeo-Arabic period among Jewish scholars towards Hebrew suggests a separating of Jewish identity from the Arab world, demonstrated by “the increased social isolation of the Jews of the Arab world.”³⁴ This is emblematic of greater societal trends as, “by its end, Hebrew was the preferred written language.”³⁵ The vitality of Judeo-Arabic in the Later Judeo-Arabic period, spanning from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century, demonstrates that, despite the popular nature of Judeo-Arabic, there is a clear movement away from Arabic as the language of the Jews.

These linguistic developments correspond with the sociopolitical developments among the Jewish communities in Morocco. The Later Judeo-Arabic period began in the sixteenth century with continued migration of highly educated Sephardic Jews who produced extensive scholarly works in Judeo-Arabic; these Sephardic Jewish scholars served as a catalyst for the flourishing of Jewish learning and popular literary production.³⁶ This cultural and intellectual apogee of Judeo-Arabic, however, was not sustained, as the subsequent reign of Sultan Yazid was characterized by persecution and violence against Moroccan Jewish communities. This persecution served as the beginning of the language’s fall from favor, as the nineteenth century began with assigning the Moroccan Jews to permanent separate quarters from their non-Jewish population by order of the sultan.³⁷ The general welfare of the Jewish population continued to diminish as Moroccan Jews fell to the periphery of society and only retained prominent roles in society in relations with Europeans. Thus, the nineteenth century saw a profound escalation in European influence coupled with a large number of Moroccan Jews migrating to Palestine.³⁸ These two events were critical in the history of Moroccan Jews, particularly in their move away from Judeo-Arabic and the severance of Moroccan Jews with their Moroccan identity.

Following the height of the vitality of Judeo-Arabic, the final period of linguistic development for the language was Modern Judeo-Arabic, which

only spanned the twentieth century. This period is characterized by a “greater production of *šarḥ* than in Later Judeo-Arabic, as well as a greater production of folk tales and other types of ‘popular literature.’”³⁹ The popular nature of the language is indicative of the fact that the educated elite of Jewish society had opted for European languages and Hebrew, rather than continuing usage of Judeo-Arabic. This period, as a result, lacks scholarly works; instead, the literary materials of this period are folk narratives, stories describing local traditions, poetry, and proverbs.⁴⁰ The most defining feature of the Modern Judeo-Arabic stage of development, however, is the abandonment of this linguistic tradition. The quick acceptance of Arabic following the Arab conquests of the seventh century was matched by the speed with which it was abandoned as North African Jews, particularly those receiving secular education, “switched away from productive use of Judeo-Arabic when political circumstances changed.”⁴¹ The Jewish population that continued to use Judeo-Arabic, as evident by the popular literature of Modern Judeo-Arabic, was the lower strata of the population, thus conferring on Judeo-Arabic a reputation as “a language of low prestige, used in writing for more basic functions and in speech by the non-elite strata of society,” particularly due to the educated elite opting for French in the 19th century.⁴² Judeo-Arabic, following this linguistic development, was abandoned as the Jewish population no longer identified with the Arabic-speaking population and, instead, identified with French Jews or as a part of a global Jewry.

III. Jewish-Muslim Relations in Morocco

Morocco, in the context of the Maghreb, is unique insofar as it shared the ethnic and religious diversity characteristic of other Maghreb countries, but has maintained its own distinct existence from the rest of the Maghreb. Muslims and Jews in Morocco spoke the same language, although in their own vernaculars, and were able to coexist in relative harmony. As previously stated, coexistence was largely dependent on circumstance and, in Morocco,

the well-being of Jews was largely dependent on where they resided. There were various Jewish communities in Morocco, including “imperial cities, smaller trading and administrative centers, mountain villages, and oasis towns,” where they engaged in various economic activities and were only excluded from military service and religious activities.⁴³ The legal status of Jews in Morocco was similar to that of Jews in the rest of the Maghreb where they were conferred the status of *dhimmis*. This status provided Jews with a degree of protection, although this protection varied depending on the circumstance. In imperial cities, Jews resided in *mellahs* and were separated from Muslims, while, in other areas, Jews were required to pay tributes to Muslim patrons who, in exchange, provided protection and security.⁴⁴ This protection, however, was not always sufficient. Therefore, beginning in the seventeenth century, Moroccan Jews “sought the protection of Western European colonial powers in preference to that of sultans, marabouts, and tribal despots,”⁴⁵ demonstrating that Moroccan Jews were already predisposed to the notion that Europe was capable of protecting them from the injustices of Muslim rule.

This predisposition held by Moroccan Jewry enabled European powers to arrive in Morocco with particular ease due to the fact that the Jewish population welcomed this foreign intervention, believing they would bring about a fairer and more just society. The arrival of Europeans in Tangier in 1850, for example, led to a rapid societal transformation that elevated Jews to be “indispensable to Europeans baffled by Arabic and the arcane court protocol.”⁴⁶ Moroccan Jewry found itself in a perfect intermediary role due to their fluency in Maghrebine Arabic. This fluency was acknowledged by French officer Charles de Foucauld, who spent two years traveling through Morocco in the late nineteenth century and described the Judeo-Arabic vernacular, noting “the Jews spoke Arabic or Tamazirt, and all could read and write in Hebrew characters which they frequently employed for writing Arabic.”⁴⁷ In his travels, he found that the urban and rural Jews lived under vastly different

states of protection, with the urban Jews being “protected by European powers and supported by the Sultan who sees them as necessary for the commercial prosperity of his empire and for his own wealth,” while the rural Jews, in contrast, were “attached to the soil, each one with his own Moslem seigneur whose private property he is.”⁴⁸ This protection was essential for the livelihood of Moroccan Jews as “economic activities were dependent on the sultan’s protection within the cities, and on tribal protection in other areas.”⁴⁹ Protection was, thus, a significant aspect of Jewish life in Morocco, as well as the entire Maghreb. The varying degrees of protection experienced by Jews, in addition to the fact that protection did not always discourage discriminatory acts against the Jewish community, led to an acceptance of European influence among the Jewish population as it promised them protection.

In the era of European imperialism, the Maghreb, specifically Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, fell under the sphere of influence of France. While European influence, specifically that of the French, had a tremendous impact on the region, the present and future of Maghrebi Jewry was particularly transformed as “the Jews of these lands were directly influenced by another factor – West European Jewry.”⁵⁰ Interestingly, the French Revolution was a critical moment for the history of Maghrebi Jews. Following the French Revolution, there was a newfound sense of liberty and confidence among European Jewry, particularly French and British Jews; these Jews were empowered to assist their coreligionists who were suffering in regions around the world. In the Maghreb, France “brought a message of freedom to the prisoners of the *mellah* ... of equality to men oppressed by special laws that enslaved the populations of the Maghreb, and of fraternity to those who were humiliated and degraded by the law of Islam.”⁵¹ The ideals of the French Revolution served to empower the Jews of the Maghreb and the arrival of Europeans in the region elevated the Jewish people to a newfound position within society as “it signified the end of second class status, and the commencement of the movement of emancipation.”⁵² This empowerment and

elevation of Jews in North Africa set the foundation for a transformation in Jewish identity and welfare in the Maghreb.

IV. French and the Alliance Israelite Universelle

In 1840, a Capuchin friar in Damascus disappeared and, as a result, several Jews were imprisoned and tortured. Adolphe Crémieux and Salomon Munk of the *Consistoire Central des Israélites de France*, the supreme French Jewish representative body, and Sir Moses Montefiore of the Board of Deputies of British Jews met with Muhammad Ali of Egypt and successfully rectified the injustices faced by the Syrian Jews. This event, albeit across the Arab world from the Maghreb, demonstrated “the lobbying strength of these Jewish leaders and it set the pattern for future intervention of European Jewry on behalf of their counterpart in the Muslim world.”⁵³ In 1860, Adolphe Crémieux and several other French Jews went on to found the Alliance Israelite Universelle with the aims of “working toward the emancipation and moral progress of the Jews,” “lending effective support to all those who suffer because of their membership in the Jewish faith,” and “to awaken Europe to the Jewish problem.”⁵⁴ In the Maghreb, and Morocco specifically, these aims were achieved through education, diplomacy, and shaping public opinion. In practice, the implementation of an educational network, based on the French model, was sufficient for carrying out these objectives. French secular education served as the means by which Moroccan Jewry came to identify with their liberated European counterparts.

The Alliance Israelite Universelle established and opened its first school in Morocco in 1862, located in Tetuan, following a time where the country and the region had already been “victimized by European political, economic, and military colonial penetration.”⁵⁵ Initially, sultans sought to prevent the influx of European influence, but the French strategy of ‘peaceful penetration’ ensured their control over Morocco. The increasing advances of Europe in Morocco led to the sultan imposing restrictions on the Jewish communities

of major cities, such as Rabat, Marrakesh, and Tetuan, forcing the Jews into *mellahs*; this served to further divide Jews from their Muslim counterparts. Jewish merchants, in particular, lost many of their privileges despite their long-term loyalty to the sultan. As a result, they sought “consular protection from the European powers” due to the widespread acceptance of the European diplomatic representation; consular protection coupled with the *protégé* system, which had previously been established in the Franco-Moroccan Treaty of 1767, led to the degradation of the sultan’s authority and the widespread embracement of European protection among Moroccan Jewry.⁵⁶ As economic activity between Europe and Morocco increased, Moroccan Jews found it increasingly necessary to seek the protection of Europe, and France in particular. Through a variety of reforms and initiatives, the European powers effectively transformed Morocco into a colonial endeavor with help from the historically subjugated Jewish people. Moroccan Jewry and the European powers, thus, entered into a mutually beneficial alliance whereas Moroccan Jews acted as the intermediaries of commerce with Europe and the European powers conferred onto them their protection. The Alliance Israelite Universelle, meanwhile, was elevated as “the protector of the Jews, by constituting the most indispensable body informed of their sufferings.”⁵⁷ The Alliance Israelite Universelle intentionally connected Moroccan Jewry with European and global Jewry, and thus, unintentionally, severed their association with the surrounding Muslim community.

The Alliance Israelite Universelle achieved their objectives and assisted Moroccan Jewry primarily through the means of their educational network. Prior to European presence in Morocco, the autonomy enjoyed by Jewish communities allowed them to receive education, predominantly Jewish education, that equipped many Jewish communities with high degrees of literacy; this literacy was mostly in Hebrew, but literacy in Hebrew script allowed for literacy in Judeo-Arabic, as the script was similarly employed.⁵⁸ The educated Jewish populace, due to their literacy and fluency in Arabic, was

an asset, thus making education a priority for the European colonial endeavor in Morocco. Consequently, the modern educational system introduced in the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools transformed the traditional Jewish culture.⁵⁹ The Alliance Israelite Universelle established school systems throughout Morocco, setting out to “disseminate French language and culture”⁶⁰ which elevated the French language as “an indispensable language for the transmission of Western culture among the Jews, their *langue adoptee*.”⁶¹ The Jewish population educated in Alliance Israelite Universelle schools, known as *evolués*, were imbued with feelings of superiority as a result of their secular French education and sought to challenge the status quo, particularly the conventional social hierarchy that had subjugated their communities.⁶² This general trend continued among Moroccan Jewry, who viewed French not only as the most important language of commerce, but also as the vehicle by which the Jews could improve the general welfare of their community within their society and improve the welfare of Maghrebi Jewry in a global context.

French, as a result, supplanted Judeo-Arabic as the language of the Jews in Morocco. In the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools, the curriculum was a combination of the French secular education, focusing on the French language, arithmetic, and European geography and history, and Jewish education, which included Hebrew, Judaic studies, and Biblical histories; Arabic, along with Moroccan history and geography, was not included in the curriculum.⁶³ The Eurocentric curriculum of the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools did not face much opposition among Moroccan Jews who “gave preference to the learnings of European languages” as “these languages rather than Arabic would benefit their children in finding lucrative employment.”⁶⁴ French effectively became the language of the Moroccan Jews and even became a uniting factor among Jews coming from different communities of varying degrees of literacy. In the institutions of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, the Jewish students “developed the habit of speaking French,

and it was this language that united them and helped eliminate linguistic and communication barriers.”⁶⁵ While Judeo-Arabic had historically been the linguistic representation of Jewish identity in Morocco, the French language was now the language that united Moroccan Jews and connected them to their coreligionists around the world.

The Alliance Israelite Universelle dramatically improved the state of the Jewish community in Morocco, and the Jewish community was now empowered by and connected to European notions of liberty and justice. Consequently, the Jews welcomed further French control over Morocco as it had become a French protectorate. In fact, “the French were well aware of Jewish support of the protectorate system and of pro-French policies,” and the Moroccan Jewish community had come to accept that “Jewish and French interests are one and the same.”⁶⁶ The Jews of Morocco looked to their coreligionists in Algeria and believed that greater French control over Morocco would lead to French naturalization for Jews. Forgoing their Moroccan identity, the Jews identified with France and French Jews and, now, sought French citizenship, which became the new mission of the Alliance Israelite Universelle. The Jews, empowered by their French secular education, believed that French citizenship would decisively end the second-class citizenship status that had been imposed on them for centuries.⁶⁷ While there was never a Crémieux-style decree in Morocco, many Moroccan Jews did obtain French citizenship, while Moroccan Jewry as a whole continued to strengthen their identification with French and global Jewry. This trend came to its apex in 1939 when the Muslim population of Morocco moved towards a nationalist movement that sought separation from France and included the Jewish population in their vision, but “most Jews either preferred close association with France or turned increasingly toward Zionism.”⁶⁸ The Jewish population of Morocco, as a consequence of centuries of subjugation as second-class citizens and the improvement in welfare as a result of French education, had definitively separated from their Moroccan identity and

sought to join the French and global Jewish communities that they had now come to be identified with.

V. Conclusion

The state of the Jewish community in the Maghreb is complex, lacking a paradigm to describe and analyze the general well-being and identity of Maghrebi Jewry, particularly with relation to their Muslim counterparts. In the absence of this paradigm, the vitality of Judeo-Arabic acts as an effective sociolinguistic indicator, revealing the Jews' simultaneous integration into and separation from the Arabic-speaking world around them. The concurrent historical, social, political, and linguistic developments reveal that the Jewish population of the Maghreb adopted an Arabic vernacular to assimilate, both out of convenience and necessity, but maintained a Jewish nature of the language in order to sustain a communal Jewish identity.

The association between language and the state of the Jewish community is especially evident in Morocco, where the Jewish community abandoned Judeo-Arabic for French when it became politically and socially convenient. Judeo-Arabic was at its strongest when there was symbiosis between Jewish and Muslim communities, although the evidence that Jews were forced to convert to Islam reveals that assimilation also occurred out of necessity. The apex of Judeo-Arabic reveals the strong association between the Jewish and Arab identities of Moroccan Jewry. The French colonial endeavors in Morocco, however, severed the identity of Moroccan Jews, bringing them closer to their European coreligionists. As the European powers, specifically the French, improved the welfare of the Jewish communities, their association with France, Europe, and a global Jewish community strengthened, while identification with their Muslim counterparts declined. This linguistic transformation in Morocco demonstrates the association between the language and identity, and can be generalized to the experiences of the entire Maghrebi Jewish population. Indeed, the vitality of Judeo-Arabic does serve

as a litmus test for the state of Jewish well-being and identity in Islamic Maghrebi societies.

Josh Kadish, a senior from New Jersey studying Modern Middle Eastern Studies and Political Science, has been told by administrators that he takes “too many classes on the Arab-Israeli conflict.” So naturally, he will be pursuing a masters degree in Tel Aviv next fall.

Endnotes

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