

A Letter to My Brother in the Maghreb

Byline:

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By Meir Buzaglo

Many years have passed since we were last in touch, but I have nevertheless never forgotten you. How could I? Seeing as my mother and father, my brothers and my sisters always remind me of you—in the way they talk and dress, in their generosity.

One cannot simply just erase hundreds of years.

I'm writing to you because I'm worried.

The world about us is rapidly changing. There are many cases of people taking decisions for others, not always with a humane approach, and rarely out of love for Man or God. Even as I write, the image rises before my eyes—boarding the boat in Casablanca, dressed in my best clothes, six years old—my family and I returning to what we then called Palestine. A very dramatic event that defies description, the realization of a dream, coming home after hundreds of years. Not because this home was in any way luxurious, and not because Morocco was foreign to us. Our parents decided to go to Jerusalem, not to Canada and not to France. We returned to the home we had left thousands of years ago, yet somehow it was here that our Moroccan identity stood out. At first it was hard. Mother wanted to return immediately, to get back to her Arab friends, but with time she got used to it; she learned Hebrew and was adored by all the residents of the housing project where we lived, Jews from all ends of the world.

And, to be sure, the songs, the music, the accent—they've all remained with us. Years later, I returned to Morocco for a visit with my wife, a Lithuanian immigrant, to Casablanca, where my family's roots are. I was stunned by the depth of my emotions. We will never forget the goodness; we will always recall the life we shared. It wasn't always idyllic, but then again, is there any place that is always idyllic?! And nevertheless, I am a zealous defender of the Maghreb; I listen to stories of the great rabbis of Morocco, about the life we shared in the Atlas Mountains.

Not only I, but my children as well, have a deep affection for Morocco—despite their having been born in Jerusalem and not knowing a word of Arabic.

Why haven't I written before? I'm not sure, but I do know why I'm writing you now. The

world about us is going crazy. The Middle East, Iraq, Syria, Libya—but it doesn't stop there. Egypt is in an upheaval, and stormy clouds cover France and England. Racism and cruelty are rearing their ugly heads. And I ask, haven't we, Jews and Arabs, originating in the Maghreb, a role to play? I mean those among us who are friends, those of us who know about living a shared life? There are problems, to be sure. Who can remain apathetic, faced with the depths of suffering of Gaza's residents? And who can remain apathetic to the thousands of missiles fired on Sderot's residents? The suffering of Jews and Arabs cries out.

Let's leave it to God to find who is to blame; our concern is about healing and about prevention.

Today, it seems, we are far from any solution. There were periods of progress in the Israel-Palestine arena, yet these were stopped short with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and bitter intifadas. Iranian Shi'ite fanaticism is now penetrating a conflict that initially was about land; Hezbollah is taking advantage of Palestinian suffering to promote Iranian expansion; and Islamic State is charging onward in a rampage of destruction. Not only are we not making any progress but the conditions necessary to overcome these problems drift farther out of reach with every passing moment. The name of Lord is being invoked in vain by those seeking destruction rather than prayer.

This is when I remember Morocco.

Despite the fact that my home is in Israel, it seems inconceivable that life in Morocco was just a coincidence. And I ask the Muslim Moroccans, was it just a coincidence that you hosted us for hundreds of years? Were not the lives of my fathers and forefathers in Morocco God's will? A history that can be linked to the present? A ray of light in this period when darkness is closing in on us? Only God knows. And nevertheless, we are obliged to try to begin thinking in exceptional ways. As I sit here and write, I hear of similar interest in the Maghreb, in France and in Israel as well. And I do not speak in Israel as a private individual.

There is a cultural ferment about Moroccan Jews in Israel the likes of which we have never seen before. It is apparent in *piyyut* and music, certainly, as well as in film, theater, and literature. This is not about people who, as I was, were born in Morocco but about Israeli-born young people who seek to give Morocco and Arab culture a place in their lives. This is a significant resource in a region that speaks only in the language of destruction.

Haven't we, as children of the Maghreb and Andalusia (who once raised the world to the lofty heights of philosophy, literature, science, and art, to a shared life of tolerance and shared faith) a human mission of the first order? Do we dare turn our backs on this mission and let others who have less understanding than we decree our fates here? Should this be the case, a covenant is called for. Let's leave agreements to states, and contracts, too. We are talking about an oath; an oath of lovers of the Lord and His children against those who sell their souls to suffering, destruction and ruin. Let us take this oath as we see before our eyes the lives shared by our mothers and fathers, the simple values of beauty and kindness that so characterize us of the Maghreb.

I have a modest contribution to make, together with my friends in the Tikun Movement, which I lead.

We plan to hold meetings in Jerusalem with artists, academics, and young people who can teach us about this friendship. This involves only an incubator, for now. And I thank our Muslim friends who have consented to join us. We need all the blessings we can get in order to succeed. I

need your blessing.

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