Moroccan Torah Scrolls: Theorizing a Diasporic Afterlife

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Abstract

Torah scrolls are more than ritual objects; when used in a congregation, they take on semi-human characteristics and are given special agency. For Sephardic communities, some scrolls bear witness to the history of migration and trade that has uprooted them over five centuries. This article examines Torah scrolls originating in Morocco or used today by Moroccan communities, arguing that they take on different meaning for the community depending on whether they are used, displayed or guarded. We consider the difference in social meaning between chanting from a scroll and venerating it, and how Moroccan Jewry is impacted by efforts in Morocco, Israel and the diaspora to ascribe ownership of the Torah via networks of patrimony and belonging. Offering an ethnographically-informed analysis of Torah scrolls in London, Essaouira and Tel Aviv, this article demonstrates that Torah scrolls serve as productive members of the communities that own them when they facilitate a thorough understanding of the migration networks that create communities.

Key words: Torah scroll, Sephardic Jewry, North Africa, migration networks

Introduction: Paris, 2021

Sortie du troisième sefer, *deux cents…Sortie du troisième* sefer *trois cents…Sortie du quatrième* sefer, *deux cents…Sortie du cinqième* sefer, *trois cents.*[1] The words come fast and,

[1] "Taking out the third Torah scroll, two hundred…taking out the third Torah scroll three hundred…taking out the fourth Torah scroll, two hundred…taking out the fifth Torah scroll, three hundred." All translations by the author.

to a non-native speaker, sound slurred. I am listening to an auction, one that I have heard before but never in French. It is an auction practiced in many Moroccan (and other Sephardic/Mizrahi) congregations around having an *aliyah*,[2] and I knew it in English and Hebrew. That evening, it would be replicated around the world in Hebrew, English, Spanish, maybe Arabic, and any other language that the Jews of North African descent speak today. Never having heard it in French before, nor in the evening, I initially mistook it for canonized ritual.

I was standing in the women's gallery in a Sephardic synagogue in Paris for *Simchat Torah*, observing how this particular community of North African lineage conducts the processions (*hakafot*) in the evening and the completion of the Torah cycle in the morning. I was listening for any sounds that were new, different, maybe that tie the liturgy to a hometown like Bône (Annaba) in Algeria or Meknes in Morocco. This community is mixed, with members from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, and even the occasional Ashkenazi who married into the community. The first new tune I heard was the auction – my ear told me the notes were GGGGGGBbAGDG – and as I tried to get close enough from the women's gallery to distinguish the words, my mind raced and I realized that it wasn't liturgy at all, but a friendly philanthropic battle for the honor of carrying the Torah.

The auction for the honor of blessing the Torah is a well-documented custom in Moroccan synagogues in Morocco and its diasporas, including in Israel and the USA, but

[2] See Goldberg 2013: 588-589 for some description of the practice of auctioning honors in the Torah service. An *aliyah* is the honor of being called up to the Torah to say the blessing preceding and succeeding the chanting from the scroll. The Torah service is broken into three *aliyot* (plural) on weekdays, four on *Rosh Hodesh* (the New Month), five on a festival, six on Yom Kippur, or seven on Shabbat morning. Its meaning here is distinct from the use of the same word when it is refers to immigration to Israel.

this is the only time it happens in the evening.[3] And it is effective as a fundraising exercise: men of all ages bid two hundred or three hundred Euros each to carry the Torah scroll, the *Sefer Torah*, during the first *hakafah*, its first procession of the evening (this congregation has twelve scrolls). With seven *hakafot*, every man would have the opportunity to carry the scroll, to dance with the scroll, and to kiss the scroll. But bidding to have it first, to be the person to escort it from the ark, is an honor, because that is central to the experience of using the scroll, of living with the scroll, and of safeguarding the scroll.

This ritual reveals the sense of reverence Jewish communities show towards the Torah scroll, just one among many of the ways to revere it. Practicing Jews call it the "tree of life" (*etz hayim*) [Goldberg 2003: 93-96] and pay ransom for it when it is kidnapped (to be discussed below). In Northern Morocco, Judeo-Spanish brides wear a dress made from the same fabric as the Torah's covering to bless their marriage in fertility (Elbaz 2018:19). Jewish ritual stipulates that the Torah is not un-living, and that despite suspicion of sorcery and superstition, it holds power that borders on the magical. This article scrutinizes the way scrolls originating in Morocco or used by Moroccan congregations are used today, arguing that scrolls hold distinct social meanings according to the way they are used. In the course of that analysis, I draw out a process by which the scrolls themselves narrate a history of empire,[4] trade and diaspora that undermines a sense that migration happens in straight lines.

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[3] There are only a few evenings of the year in which the Torah is taken out of the ark. Another is *kol nidrei,* the evening service at the beginning of Yom Kippur, but the auction did not take place then.

[4] I use the term "empire" several times as code for the modes of power and patronage whereby Jews moved around and across the Mediterranean via a series of push and pull factors. The major push factor was expulsion, as occurred in Spain and Portugal (and, previously, in England), then later in several Arab countries. The pull factors were economic, such as the movement of Jews from Tetouan to Gibraltar as merchants or to Livorno, or for increased religious toleration, such as the Spanish and Portuguese migration to Amsterdam or

The Jewish tradition is full of accounts of texts that narrate migratory networks. Sarah Abrevaya Stein speaks eloquently on the subject:

> Documents retroactively fabricated, left behind, hoarded and sought, guarded, concealed, buried in the sand…When it comes to studying Jews' experience of decolonization, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East, the historian inevitably bumps up against an active and highly politicized multi-party contest over the sources of the Jewish past – one laced through with the complex history of Jews' relationship to the colonial and postcolonial order, and, indeed, power itself. (Stein 2015: 904)

The sense of a dramatic back-story reverberates especially strongly in the presence of an old scroll.[5] In February 2020, I made the acquaintance of a scroll marked "Pereira, Morocco, 1734" on a Shabbat morning in London. The scroll had unusual characteristics compared to scrolls I had examined before, like the letter *ayin* sloping below the line and written with a heavy script, making it appear darker and thicker than the other letters. Perhaps this was an idiosyncrasy, like the columns that contain 46 lines instead of the more common 42. Rolling it and chanting from it no doubt reminds a reader of the strange visceral power scrolls hold

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across the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, when I refer to empire, I refer to a combination of top-down migration orders and more elite movement between and among Christian and Muslim powers. I draw from the work of Marglin (2014), Stein (2008, 2015), Schreier (2017), and Everett and Vince (2020).

[5] Certain experts can identify scrolls quickly, such as the historians and scribes at the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London: (http://memorialscrollstrust.org, last accessed July 21 2021). That expertise is well beyond the knowledge of scrolls required of even expert chanters.

over their practitioners, but in the first instance, I wondered what it was doing in London,[6] and I considered the cultural meaning that was transmitted with it across global networks.

A scroll has limited affective power sitting in the ark, certainly sitting in the ark unused, and especially being placed in a museum or buried in a cemetery (Goldberg 1990: 251) or *genizah*. It is the taking out, the parading, and above all, the voicing of the scroll that makes it a transformative, definitive performance experience for the Jewish people.[7] Indeed, its status that veers between hidden and visible contributes to its intrigue. So while the Pereira scroll in London might indeed be of interest as an object of material culture, it is perhaps primarily through the lenses of sound studies and performance practice that it has the capacity to define the Jewish experiences. In part, this is because the chanting of the Torah represents a rupture in linear notions of time, history and memory (see Yerushalmi 1996), as when we chant from it every week and return to the beginning once a year. This article considers Moroccan Torah scrolls (or scrolls used by Moroccan congregations) from the perspective of ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology, as agents in possession of vitality and properties that have the capacity themselves to influence history (Elbaz 2021: 10-20, Goldberg 2003: 93-96, Semi 2014: 5-7). But it does so in dialogue with accounts of North African Jewish trade cultures, such as Sarah Abrevaya Stein's discussions of print culture

[6] Actually, its journey to London was my second thought. My first thought was whether I was the first woman who had the privilege of handling it, and I was grateful to the congregant who went through some strict gatekeeping to show it to me.

[7] Scrolls are not only of interest to Jews, either; an Evangelical Christian charity in Cleburne, Texas has collected forty scrolls, including several from Morocco, and the scrolls tour the Bible belt: https://www.cmj-usa.org/blog/ancient-hebrew-scroll-project (Accessed July 21 2021). (Also http://ancienthebrewscrollproject.org/Websites/ancienthebrewscrollproject/images/Ancient%20Hebrew%20Scroll%20Brochure%202016.pdf, which is currently inaccessible for GDPR reasons).

(2015) and the ostrich feather trade (2008) and Joshua Schreier's biography of merchant Jacob Lasry (2017), and in a broader context of Jewish contributions to Maghrebi music-making by Jonathan Glasser (2012) and Chris Silver (2020). Thinking of Moroccan Torah scrolls as figures in Jewish history, performance and ritual, exploring their performance context and their transmission through the apparatus of trade and expulsion, this article frames Torah scrolls as one node in a fluid Sephardic migration across several centuries.

This article employs a mixed methodology, with a primarily ethnographic approach that draws from ethnomusicology and anthropology of religion. There is some attention to history by virtue of the close analysis of the provenance of one scroll (which required archival research), but the history of an object serves primarily to inform the meaning of the object by the people who use it today. That scroll, the Pereira Scroll, is the vessel through which I commenced an ethnographic analysis of Torah scrolls used by Moroccan and Sephardic congregations, but it demonstrates only one dimension of how Moroccan Torah scrolls are used today. I argue that scrolls are mobilized and honored in different ways across Israel, Morocco and their diasporas, and in analyzing the different ways I have encountered scrolls during my fieldwork, a series of trends have emerged that I describe in different contexts: guardianship; patrimony; and everyday use. Rather than a typology, this represents a broad range of activities that enact a series of often-conflicting attitudes to memorializing Jewish life. What I propose is a theorizing of the afterlife of these scrolls, and of how to think about a ritual life that has ended in one form and transformed into several new forms as the Jews of North Africa have moved with continuous realignments of empire.

The Torah Scroll in North African Jewish Ritual

A Torah scroll's text is the same from one community to another,[8] unlike a prayer book (*siddur*) that bears substantial enough difference from one country/region or denomination to another as to render it unrecognizable to outsiders. An Israeli prayer book offers no translation, even of the difficult or ancient words that don't exist in Modern Hebrew. A Reform prayer book might be abridged, or add the names of the matriarchs to key prayers. A Modern Orthodox prayer book might contain a prayer for the State of Israel that renders it blasphemous to certain anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox, or a Moroccan prayer book might include scores of pages of paraliturgical poetry (*piyyutim*) for which visitors do not know the tune.[9] In other words, a *siddur* is a minefield of the discrete identity divides between Jews of many ethnic and denominational backgrounds, whereas the Torah's text remains fixed even among those biblical scholars who identify grammatical errors in it. The differences between scribal schools are minor, and the rules for writing a scroll have been established for centuries. In a sense, the Torah scroll is a mechanism in Jewish life that requires little translation between groups.

At the same time, traditions of chanting the Torah and the rituals associated with its procession can differ widely even within a region.[10] While all North African communities chant the Torah according to the same principles, there are often-substantial local differences between styles (see Aïm 2018, Tasat 1993, or Thomas 2013). North African Jewish culture abounds with examples of the Torah scroll being treated as human or quasi-human, and

[8] There are some differences in scribal traditions, like in the Yemenite school, but they are minor and, for the most part, only detectable to experts.

[9] Kligman's work on the liturgy of Aleppo (2009) focuses in part on "the red book" (*Shir Ushevacha Hallel Vezimra*) of *pizmonim* or paraliturgical contrafacta, a repertoire that is used by Syrian Jews.

[10] Procession refers to the parading of the scroll before or after a Torah reading, or in a rotation (*hakafah*) on a festival. This can, in some circumstances, also refer to a procession during a *hillula* (see fn 12 below).

possessing special power in promoting fertility. Harvey Goldberg explains the Moroccan custom of a childless couple offering a Torah scroll to the community as a de facto descendant (Goldberg 2003: 93-96), and folklorist Shalom Sabar describes how it might be brought into a birthing room for good luck (2009: 166). In his 2009 article about Torah scrolls, Sabar examines conceptions of the Torah's special power. He says:

> In the folk tradition of selected Jewish communities in the lands of Islam particular Torah scrolls became rather well-known because they were believed to possess special protective powers or even perform miracles. It is true that these beliefs are not limited to the Torah scroll, and there are many traditions associating Hebrew books with super-natural powers, or the ability to drive evil forces, overcome enemies, forecast the future, and so forth, because of the sacred texts contained in them or because a righteous person used them…Two notable examples are *La Ghriba*, or the marvellous Torah scroll of Bône (now Annaba) in Algeria, and the *Seghir*, or the small Torah scroll of Darnah in Libya.[11] Both of these scrolls are believed to have been inscribed in Eretz Israel, and about the latter it is even told it was produced in the time of Ezra. (2009:167)

The *Seghir*, the small Torah scroll of Darnah (Libya) is now located at the Shaarei Tsedec synagogue in Netanya, the coastal city in Israel, where it is brought out annually for a saint veneration ritual known as a *hillula* on the first of Elul (usually in August).[12] On that

[11] Stories of the wonders of the *Seghir* scroll are collected by Libyan Jews in Israel in Zuaretz et al (1960), and synthesized by Goldberg (1990).

[12] A *hillula* takes place on the anniversary on the Jewish calendar of a righteous person's (*tzaddik*'s) death. The prototype of the *hillula* is Lag ba'Omer, held in May in celebration/commemoration of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, but Moroccan Jews have 656 *tzaddikim* (plural). The first of Elul is the *hillula* for Rabbi David Hanagid, grandson of Maimonides, who was a leading jurist in Cairo until his death in 1300.

occasion, the Torah scroll itself becomes a site for veneration practices unique to Moroccan Jewry, in which the Torah scrolls become "personified *tzaddikim*" (Goldberg 2013: 587).[13]

The *Seghir* is a good example of the way a Torah scroll can become a focal point of ritual for members of multiple diasporas. The *hillula*, a saint veneration ritual for Moroccan and some Tunisian Jews that offers some similarity with the Sufi *mawlid* or the more specific Moroccan *mussem* (see Nabti 2010),[14] celebrates the life of a saintly figure by, among other things, parading the Torah scroll in a procession. In the case of a special scroll that is brought out once every year, the power of the ritual transfers to it. Its use in the ritual demonstrates that the Torah's meanings are multi-valent. It is displayed publicly but people have private and intimate relationships with it. Jews translate it but demand that it be chanted in the original. It is sufficiently holy that (most) chanters don't touch it with their bare fingers.[15] The performance practice of chanting, and communal interaction with the scroll reveal a complex transnational and asynchronous dynamic of movement, exile, trade, and patronage.

That dynamic often blurs the past and present for Jewish communities that own Torah scrolls, since a scroll can be used by a congregation or cherished as evidence of a community that is no longer viable. One such scroll lives today in the Bardo Museum in Tunis, having been trafficked from Libya in the chaotic aftermath of the "Arab spring."[16] The Jewish

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[13] See Bilu (2009: 244-266) for a gendered perspective on ritual being classed as sacred or witchcraft.

[14] For in-depth analysis of the *hillula*, see Bilu (2009), and for a critique of the commodification of the *hillula*, see Kosansky (2002).

[15] This is a generalization, and a fluid one. At the Aden Jews Congregation, the chanter touches the parchment directly while reading.

[16] https://www.timesofisrael.com/smugglers-of-rare-torah-scroll-caught-in-tunisia/ (Accessed July 21 2021). https://www.cjfai.com/en/la-communaute-juive-de-djerba-tente-de-capter-le-trafic-des-objets-de-cultes-juifs/ (Accessed July 21 2021).

community of Libya had emigrated between 1948 and 1952 – about thirty-two thousand of them moving to Israel (see de Felice 1984: 232) – and Libya remained mostly closed to tourism for several decades, so little information emerged about what happened to the synagogues of Misurata and Tripoli. Soon after the ouster of the Ghaddafi regime in 2011, though, Torah scrolls and other items of religious value found their way to the black market, sometimes sold to collectors and others offered for a price to the historic Jewish community of Djerba (see Udovitch and Valensi 1984).[17] Tunisian historians like Habib Kazdaghli work today to commemorate Jewish life in Tunisia appropriately (see Pollock et al 2015), and the ransomed scroll was eventually saved when the Tunisian state recovered it, at which point it was placed in the Bardo where it is framed as a piece of Tunisian cultural heritage.

As a news story, the ransoming of this scroll wasn't distributed beyond Jewish newspapers and blogs about the North African revolutions. Because the story ended with the scroll being placed in the national museum and incorporated into national (Tunisian) history, it made for a curious moment of political drama rather than a sordid tale of conspiracy theory. Yet the story reveals the strength of a Torah scroll's affective power over communities. When it goes missing, both a community and a host state hurry to redeem it, such is its practical value to the former and symbolic value to the latter.

Chanting, Processing, Display

https://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-photos-manuscrit-de-torah-unique-monde-decouvert-saisi/ (Accessed July 21 2021).

[17] Djerba, as the home of a notable scribal school, is the purported home of some of the most important scrolls in Israel today; the pioneering work of Robert Lachmann documented the cantillation style of Djerba, and Ruth Davis has written extensively about the island's communal religious life in the late-twentieth century.

There is a difference between chanting from a scroll, processing with it, and displaying it. As an ethnomusicologist, I have been primarily occupied for some time with the musical skills that go into learning to chant the Torah: learning the cantillation marks (modes, ornamentation, theories of applying marks to words), practicing vocal control and mastery of a wide vocal range, proper breathing while chanting, and transposition, i.e. singing in different ranges according to how the congregation responds. I have been equally absorbed in the textual skills required to chant: Hebrew literacy, of course, then reading without diacritics; strong enough comprehension of the text to be able to improvise the grammar of disjunctives; and sufficient knowledge of the text to be able to find one's place and roll a scroll, which takes years of training. Learning all of these skills can be done with practice and supervision, aided by a widely available literature (especially Jacobson 2002 and Kadari 1995).

Yet fluency with the text is only one component of understanding the many different ways congregations use a Torah scroll, to say nothing of the varied social meanings attached to it. This might be because the scrolls themselves have participated in the same idiosyncratic circulation networks of Sephardic migration as the members of the community. Learning about the way a scroll is used in a diverse community is often a complex process of coming to understand the role a congregation perceives itself to play in an equally complex history of human movement across empires (see Marglin 2014). In the process of studying scrolls and their chanting from an ethnographic perspective, I have encountered a range of ways of engaging with a Torah scroll, and I present that range here as three categories of behavior, each revealing a particular attitude towards the condition of exile and diaspora.

First, and perhaps most complex, is the sense among congregations around the diaspora that they are custodians of a scroll; that the congregation guards it on behalf of a community that can no longer participate fully in Jewish life. I have encountered this attitude

in the USA – on the East Coast, the West Coast, in the South – and in Sephardic congregations in London. I will describe my experience in London at some length, but what I gleaned from discussions in London's Sephardic synagogues is equally true of some non-Sephardic synagogues in the United States, in congregations that "adopt" and provide a home for scrolls that have moved as the Jewish populations of the Arab world have scattered across the diaspora. For some of these communities, the Torah scrolls are immigrants just like members of the congregation,[18] and they consider it to be an honor and a responsibility to keep them safe as they would members of the community. Whether the scroll moved with a community that was expelled in the decades following 1948,[19] or that encountered population fluctuations with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, congregations hold on to these scrolls as though they are contributing to commemorating life in a part of the world that has been emptied of its Jewish population.

Second, I encountered several cases across North Africa of Torah scrolls "adopted" by state authorities and displayed for the purpose of narrating a national narrative in which Jews are key participants through history (see Gottreich 2020). This is the case with the scroll trafficked from Libya and on display in the Bardo in Tunis, and others that are based today in Essaouira, Morocco. In Arabic-speaking countries where relations with Israel have warmed over the past decade, and where there is perhaps the possibility of trade or tourism from Jews

[18] There is indeed some precedent here in Harvey Goldberg's work on Torah scrolls in southern Morocco (1990), in which he describes the welcoming of a scroll in and out of the synagogue when it is required elsewhere.

[19] There is no single term commonly used for the mass emigration of Jews from the Arab world, but it is widely acknowledged that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (and the dispossession of local Palestinians) was a major catalyst for emigration of the Jews of Iraq and Yemen, and over the next twenty years, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Libya and so on.

in Israel or France (Kosansky 2002), one is extremely likely to encounter a Torah scroll in a national museum. In both cases and others, the Torah is framed in a regional context – Moroccan, Tunisian, Arab world – not only as a way of framing national history (heritage), but as a way of looking towards a future that includes Jewish participation (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995 and Roda 2015).

Third, I have encountered many cases where a Torah scroll is described without particular fanfare, nor a noble biography attached to it, but as a scroll that is used regularly for chanting. This attitude is widespread in the many Sephardic and Mizrahi congregations in Israel and France, and I will describe the way an Iraqi scroll is used in a Francophone congregation in Tel Aviv consisting of members whose families had previously immigrated to France from North Africa. In these cases, the Torah scroll itself is not the attraction for the congregation – it is the liveness and vibrancy of the community that is noteworthy (Thomas 2013).

These categories are not fixed, of course, as rituals often cross over from one category to another. One can identify plenty of Sephardic scrolls in Montreal that are in regular use, or the case of the *Seghir* scroll in Netanya that is only brought out once a year for procession (Sabar 2009: 167). Whether the Torah scroll can be conceptualized as a piece of heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995), a *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989) or an object for veneration (Bilu 2009), in its power for facilitating ritual or re-framing imperial entanglements, the Torah scroll's affective power is indisputable.

The Pereira Scroll: Custodianship and Guardianship

"Pereira, Morocco, 1734." Written on a post-it note attached to the silver rollers, the biography of this scroll that sits in the ark at London's historic Bevis Marks Synagogue is concise. Yet it conveys immediately the entanglements of migration, diaspora, trade and geopolitics that transport Torah scrolls across a trans-national network of Sephardic

communities. Those three words are so vivid that they tell a near-complete story of a wealthy family whose reputation is insured by good deeds; a congregation that was built on the dreams of exiled merchants; and a life in lands whose rulers' whims dictated whether Jews could stay or go. By unfurling some central questions about how the Pereira Scroll came to London, how it is used today, and what it and other scrolls like it mean in commemorating Jewish life in Morocco or Tunisia, I argue that this special scroll sits unused as a reminder of the long history of Jewish life in North Africa, and the congregation that hosts it serves as a custodian of a Jewish life there that is considered to be left in the past.

The Pereira of the scroll was the Baron Diego Pereira d'Aguilar, known to London's Jewish community as Moshe Lopes Pereira, who was born in Lisbon in 1699 (d. London 1759) and made a baron by the Empress Maria Theresa. He moved from Lisbon to London in the 1720s, and to Vienna after establishing a monopoly on tobacco imports (Kayserling 1906). Fleeing Vienna in 1749 as a Spanish extradition request was issued for him, he arrived in London and donated the scroll in 1752. A relationship with Bevis Marks Synagogue continued for many generations, and Moshe Lopes Pereira's son was the synagogue's treasurer later in the eighteenth century (Kerner 2019). The family fortune was earned largely in the Caribbean (Arbell 2002: 160-161), and much of it was squandered within a few generations (Perera 1995: 80-85).

Portuguese Jews are often lesser-recognized among *Sephardim*, but in London, they make up a substantial portion of the Western Sephardic community that is served by a number of prominent synagogues (Kerner 2019). The historical conditions that brought Portuguese Jews to London are distinct from those that sent exiled Spanish Jews, the *Megorashim* to Morocco. Both groups, sharing a porous border, were subject to demands of conversion to Christianity (see Soyer 2007). But whereas the Jews of Spain were quite publicly expelled (sometimes to Portugal), the Jews of Portugal were prevented from leaving

initially, isolating them from the mobile Jews of Sepharad. As the Jews of Spain moved[20] – westward to Portugal in the 1480s, north to Amsterdam, across the Mediterranean to Morocco and Italy, and eventually Turkey and Tunisia – their rabbinic traditions continued to flourish, whereas the Jews of Portugal were cut off for decades from rabbinic decrees and more advanced Jewish practices. When they were expelled some decades later, the majority travelled northwards to Bourdeaux and Amsterdam rather that southwards to the Mediterranean basin, and not immediately accepted in their new communities like Amsterdam. As Miriam Bodian explains, the *conversos* of Portugal were looked upon with suspicion by other Jews in their new communities, and their incorporation into a community's mainstream sometimes took generations (1999).

The readmission of the Jews to England in the 1650s presented an opportunity for Portuguese Jews, often stigmatized as *conversos*, to join a mainstream Jewish community (see Barnett 1973-1975). The commissioning of a Torah scroll is an effective way to cement long-term patronage rights in a Jewish community (see Goldberg 2003), so the very act of commissioning the scroll is part of a process of reconciliation with a bumpy and perhaps painful past, or as Svetlana Boym says, "diasporic intimacy is not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but constituted by it" (1998: 508). That the scroll was in use for several centuries demonstrates the power that a scroll has to perform the religious, political and communal work of reconciling a troubled history.

[20] Ray (2008) argues that it is worth considering in more detail how the local identities of the Jews of Cordoba or Barcelona became a homogenous unit called Sephardi in the sixteenth century. He explores the way that diasporic identities are sometimes constructed without consideration of local specificity, and one can see a similar dynamic at play today in France with the gradual erosion of small local differences between North African Jewish communities.

Arriving from Morocco, the Pereira Scroll took a different path, the path of Spanish Jews. Among the widely varied trajectories of the Jews of Spain, many settled in northern Morocco and, soon, across the Ottoman Empire. The shortest journey was to Tetouan in northern Morocco, and when the British Empire took control of Gibraltar, many Jewish merchants from Tetouan travelled the even shorter distance to try their hand at the lucrative trade there (Schreier 2017). At the other end of the trans-imperial network, Jews were re-admitted to England in the 1650s after nearly four centuries of expulsion (Kerner 2019), and many of them came from Amsterdam where the Spanish-Portuguese rite remained prevalent. Without any Sephardic scribes in London, the main synagogue (Bevis Marks, which opened in 1701 in its current location) would have looked to other well-established Sephardic communities to commission *Sifrei Torah*. When the Livorno-born Rabbi Isaac Nieto arrived at Bevis Marks in 1728 (Ruderman 1992), he brought ties to the scribes of northern Morocco who fulfilled Moshe Lopes Pereira's commission.

The arrival in London of the Pereira scroll therefore requires following several distinct paths for Sephardic Jewry: the path of members of today's Western Sephardic congregations who come from Portugal, often via Amsterdam (or even the Caribbean, like the Pereira family); the path of the scroll from Morocco to London for which Gibraltar is an intermediary through imperial trade; and the path of hundreds of thousands of Jews referred to as "Moroccan," from Spain to Tetouan and then across north Africa, that brought *Megorashim*, through the mechanism of trade, to settle eventually in France, Israel, Montreal, and beyond.

Opening this scroll therefore takes its user on a journey through this complex history of migration driven by shifting geopolitics and the ebbs and flows of empires that would accommodate Jews, but the scroll is not currently in use. It is usable (*kasher*), but in need of

replenishment. The inventory of the synagogue's collection of *Sifrei Torah* from 1968 describes the scroll's condition:

> 24. Embossed silver handles. Presented by Moshe Lopes Pereira in 5494 – 234 years old. Lettering very well preserved. Parchment needs thorough cleaning to get rid of black patches. Otherwise it is Kasher. PRIORITY FOR ATTENTION.[21]

The scroll goes unused despite being *kasher*, and it comes out of the ark to be displayed as part of a story of Sephardic migration and displacement. In that regard, its key role in Sephardic Jewish life today is through the congregation's custodianship of it, as caretaker for members of the community who are no longer welcome in the Arab world. This scroll narrates the state of precarity that London's Sephardic community has long shed in their centuries as British citizens, and its presence in the ark serves as a reminder of that history of displacement.

At the same time, the Pereira Scroll is joined in the ark by scrolls from other parts of the Arab world where Jewish life is no longer considered feasible. When I examined the Pereira Scroll, I also examined a scroll from Iraq written on dark brown leather – a kind of material I never saw before or since. Bevis Marks Synagogue is visited frequently by tour groups because of its historic value as London's oldest still-used synagogue, and as such, keeping those scrolls in the ark even if they go unused is, in a way, a show of solidarity with communities that once resided in the Arab world but don't any longer.

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[21] *Minutes of the Council Meeting* for Lauderdale Road Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue, August 27 1968. While Bevis Marks is the historic Sephardic synagogue in the City of London, and remains an important institution and tourist site, the flagship Sephardic synagogue today is Lauderdale Road, which is located closer to London's Jewish community. The report on the condition of the Torah scrolls was written by a Rabbi P. Toledano. I thank my student and research assistant Isaac Montague Treuherz, who photographed the minute book in the archive at Lauderdale Road Synagogue during the height of the pandemic.

In other words, through its pride of place in the ark of a historic Sephardic synagogue in London, the Pereira Scroll takes its investigator on a trip across the Mediterranean basin and through a history of Sephardic Jewish life of the past five hundred years. Bevis Marks, sitting not far from the Thames where Jewish merchants contributed to the trans-Atlantic trade of luxury goods (Stein 2008), brought its rabbi over from Gibraltar (Schreier 2017) and imported a Moroccan Torah at the commission of a Portuguese baron (Minutes of the Council 1968). Yet the arrival of the Torah scroll did not mean the end of a back-and-forth with North African Jewry. Indeed, when Rabbi Toledano's report was presented to the synagogue council in 1968, he noted that there were no scribes (*sofrim*) in London who were competent to restore a Sephardic scroll, so he would make inquiries in France. The navigation of a Torah scroll's history and meaning is therefore a lesson in migration and geopolitics, and studying the Pereira scroll in London demonstrates that a well-theorized triangular migration of people between North Africa, France and Israel (see Everett and Vince 2020), quickly expands to a web including London, Montreal, Livorno, Amsterdam, Gibraltar, Spain, Portugal, and the Caribbean. Keeping the Pereira Scroll in the ark projects the outlook that Bevis Marks Synagogue is the guardian of a tradition and the custodian of a heritage that can no longer be found in much of the Arab world.

Jewish Patrimony in North Africa

It is common to encounter the attitude among Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews across the diaspora that custodianship of Moroccan Torah scrolls is an appropriate way to honor the destruction of Jewish life in the Muslim world. In the UK and USA, a researcher or layperson can find this attitude wherever one finds Sephardic Torah scrolls. This attitude demonstrates a sense that the Muslim world is no longer secure for Jews, and that Jewish life in the Arab world is a matter for historical discussion rather than a present-day reality. In many cases,

that attitude reveals uncomfortable truths about the trajectory of Sephardic Jews in the twentieth-century. Yet Jewish life persists in the Muslim world, with music scholarship by Maureen Jackson (2013) and Vanessa Paloma Elbaz (2021) documenting current practices. In several cases around North Africa, a tourist encounters Torah scrolls not only as a record of Jewish life in the Arab world, but as an object or subject of national patrimony. In this section, I will describe one particular case of the Moroccan Torah scroll as patrimony – that is, an object of national interest and cultural value – as a way of understanding the attempt to incorporate Jews into a national story where they continue to live in small numbers but welcome Jewish tourists in much larger numbers.

Travelling in Morocco today, a researcher recognizes a dual set of phenomena that upsets strict delineation between past and present in the everyday practice of remembering. First, there is a pocket of Moroccan scholarship, exemplified by the work of Aomar Boum (2013), that contextualizes Jewish life ethnographically through the memories of Muslim Moroccans. This strand of scholarship focuses on social relations and discussions in the public sphere, a bottom-up formalizing of memory that captures the everyday interactions between Jews and Muslims in the mountains and the *mellah* (Jewish quarter), and the feelings of Moroccans about Jewish emigration.

At the state level, though, remembering the Jewish past has been proceeding apace for the past decade through heritage practices that blur past and present. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to heritage as a "new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (1995: 141) and we will return later on to the notion of Torah scrolls, as subjects of Jewish memory in Morocco, self-consciously blurring the past and the present. This happens today in the city of Essaouira, where a museum of Jewish history opened in 2020 with three Torah scrolls from the same era as the Pereira scroll as their centerpiece.

Morocco stands alone in the Arab world today in its official embrace of its former Jewish community. The population there is small, but the substantial populations of Jewish Moroccans in Israel and France travel there as tourists for veneration (*hilulla*) events. And it is one of the few countries in the Arab world where it is possible to enter with an Israeli passport, transforming it ironically into a pilgrimage site for people who characterized themselves as living in exile over many centuries (see Hess 2008). At the center of the formalizing of official state infrastructure to support the Jewish community is the Honorable Andre Azoulay, adviser to His Majesty Mohammed VI. Azoulay (as he is known to Moroccans and to academics who study Morocco) is such an influential figure for the public sphere, for musical festivals, research, and Jewish life, that academics who visit Morocco for conferences tend to enter into a first-name relationship with him.[22] He was born in Essaouira, previously known as Mogador, and among his duties outside the government, he has committed to transforming Essaouira into a primary tourism destination through support for music festivals that run throughout the year, making his hometown a contemporary site of cultural production.

As a component of his life's work as an intermediary in cultural dialogue, Azoulay is patron to a Jewish Museum in Essaouira, which opened to great fanfare a month before the onset of the global pandemic. His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco inaugurated the museum in January 2020.[23] It is called Beit Dakira, which is basically mutually intelligible in Hebrew and Arabic as "House of Memory," and its display cases present objects of note from Moroccan Jewish material culture. Its grand opening constituted news in Francophone and

[22] Whether Azoulay is the driver of this process or a product of it is a legitimate matter for deliberation elsewhere. There seems to be a consensus, though, that he has played a key role in facilitating the enshrining of Jewish history in Moroccan law, education and tourism.

[23] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=losct_h_haM (Accessed July 27 2021).

Arabic-speaking media across North Africa and France in part because of the involvement of His Majesty and Azoulay, and also because of the attendance at the opening of Moroccan Jewish persons of interest like comedian Gad Elmaleh. As a House of Memory, Beit Dakira displays a memory of Convivencia as a core value (see Boum 2013: 161-166), focusing on the role that coexistence has had in Moroccan history. Yet the historic Moroccan Torah scrolls that are the centerpiece of the collection – and written in Morocco within a century of the Pereira scroll – are housed off-site in the Haim Pinto synagogue where they can be used. Azoulay told me during a meeting in London that His Majesty donated the Torah scrolls himself (Personal communication, 2020).

Donating a scroll that can be used is a great service to a community, since the scroll is uniquely positioned to facilitate a live service. In Harvey Goldberg's analysis of a small local synagogue in rural Morocco, "It is essentially the presence of a Torah scroll that turns a room or building into a synagogue" (1990: 249), because the live chanting of the Torah is a key difference between private and public prayer. Its presence brings a community to life, and brings an ancient text into everyday consciousness.[24] In the course of the Torah service, the Torah scroll quite literally becomes a *lieu de mémoire* as formulated by Pierre Nora (1989), acting as it does as a member of the community who holds on to collective knowledge on the community's behalf. The Torah scroll serves as the chief site for enacting the past and ensuring continuity with it. As a *lieu de mémoire*, the Torah scroll exists in an atemporal state that connects the past to the present through ritual, and in Morocco today, as a mechanism for building Moroccan Jewish history into the fabric of the present-day nation-state.

[24] In Israel today, the discussion of the weekly Torah portion (*parashat hashavua*), is sometimes referred to as *inyana deyoma*, an Aramaic term for "the matter of the day." This is an interesting construction because it implies that the study in the presence of the weekly chanted portion is current and pressing.

A single Torah scroll is considered to be quite a generous gift, and three is the maximum number of scrolls a community might ever reasonably need. A single scroll facilitates chanting of the weekly Torah portion, and therefore it is the starting-point for communal viability. On some Shabbat mornings, though, there might be a festival, or the new moon (*Rosh Chodesh*), for which one might be required to chant a short second reading. Using the same scroll would be cumbersome, since rolling the scroll from one section to another takes time and expertise, and would hold up the service. Having a second scroll to hand facilitates a service's seamless continuity. And on very rare occasions, it might be both a festival and the new moon on a Shabbat morning, in which case it might be necessary to open a third scroll for a supplementary reading (*maftir*). I have attended services at North African congregations on such occasions (Moroccan-specific or more broadly Sephardic in France), such as the seventh day of Hanukkah, which is also the new moon, and I can attest that bringing out a third scroll caused substantial confusion in the women's gallery upstairs, such is the technical expertise required to manage the different readings.

Taking three scrolls as the maximum that might be required in a service – perhaps three times a year – is a satisfying confirmation that these scrolls donated by the king are expected to be used, transforming them from objects of fascination with Jewish heritage into a part of Moroccan patrimony. Jessica Roda explains the distinction between heritage and patrimony as the distinction between past-looking and future-looking constructions of cultural inheritance (2015: 76), and the scrolls destined for Beit Dakira bring this distinction into vibrant relief. The decision to put this valuable donation to use demonstrates a perspective that formalizing Jewish history into the wider history of Morocco – rendering the past present through ritual – is one avenue to building Jews into Moroccan society today (see Gottreich 2020). This intervention from above to inscribe the memory of a Jewish past into the current cultural practices of Morocco through Torah scrolls illustrates, quite dramatically,

the way that scrolls have the capacity to marshall political power. Equally poignantly, their contribution as scrolls to be used but owned by a museum offers insight into how a patrimony is conceived and executed.

Everyday Use in Tel Aviv

Guardianship and patrimony are poignant reminders of the space that Jews occupied in the Arab world historically, but a Torah scroll is never as alive as when it is being used in a service. Drawing from the concept of *inyana deyoma*, the study of the weekly Torah portion as though it were the discussion of current events, one discerns that engaging with the Torah scroll has the unique capacity to blur time, and particularly a sense of past and present. Exploring the multiple and varied uses of a Torah scroll enlarges our understanding of how the chanting of the Torah brings its narrative into the present in a visceral way. When it is used every day (that is to say, in the everyday, which is four times per week in Jewish ritual), the Torah, in a sense, renders the events from the text current and continuous.

Navigating the lives of Torah scrolls from Morocco or used by Moroccan congregations engages a well-theorized triangle of mobility between North Africa, France, and Israel (see Everett and Vince 2020). Some Torah scrolls are written in Israel and sent to congregations in France who trace their lineage to Algeria, and some scrolls are written in Morocco and follow their community to France, even if many members of the community eventually immigrate to Israel. Unlike many migration routes that move in one direction, this triangle moves in every direction, with Moroccan Israelis traveling to Morocco as tourists in

a fascinating example of what Christin Hess calls *reverse diaspora* (2008),[25] and the occasional French Jew even moving back to Morocco.

Most Moroccan Jews moved to Israel,[26] though, with a substantial minority moving to France, and among the French Jews, a small number have moved to Israel over the past decade. Israelis call these immigrants *Tsarfokaim*, a portmanteau for French (*Tzarfati*) and Moroccan (*Marokai*). They have arrived, for the most part, since 2012, especially during a period of frequent domestic attacks on synagogues from 2012-2015. Their main synagogue in Tel Aviv is called Tziyon Lev, based on Kalisher Street near the market. Its sermon is delivered in French, and the prayer book is French, and most of its French-born members have parents who were born in Morocco. In this particularly expensive part of Tel Aviv, the members of the congregation come from affluent French Jewish communities such as Toulouse and Paris's sixteenth and seventeenth arrondissements.[27] The Francophone influx to Tel Aviv also includes many young people coming to Israel to study for an MA, who move to nearby Florentin.

The rabbi at Tziyon Lev, Avraham Lemmel, is Ashkenazi (unlike most of the synagogue's membership), and he has learned to adjust his liturgy to the demands of a

[25] The concept of reverse diaspora might bring to mind the concept of *yerida*, of a Jew emigrating from Israel to the diaspora. The literature of yerida is prominent in Israel Studies, from high theory (Zerubavel 1986) to sociology of labor patterns (Rebhun 2014, Uriely 1995) to pop culture (Habib and Locker-Biletzki 2018).

[26] The number commonly cited is that 90% of Moroccan Jews went to Israel (see Laskier 1989: 323) and the remainder to France, while the figure for Algeria is the reverse.

[27] Since 2012, annual immigration from France has been in the thousands, especially at a record high in 2015-2016. Jews from working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhoods like Paris's nineteenth arrondissement or Sarcelles, or the Mzabi Jews from Strasbourg immigrate too, but they are more likely to move to the coastal city of Netanya where property is affordable.

diverse group with roots across North Africa who are all French-speakers and French citizens. When I interviewed Rabbi Lemmel to ask about their silver-encased Torah scrolls, he explained that the style of chanting the Torah derives from the diversity of the synagogue's membership. He says:

> The Torah reading (*Kriyat hatorah*) depends on who comes that day. Sometimes I read if no one else can read. I do it and that's Ashkenazi, but pronunciation is Sephardi. Because if I read in Ashkenazi 100% people will not understand[28]…Most of the time it is Moroccan, Tunisian, Iraqi, Algerian. Always volunteers…We don't have a community that is so strict (*makpid*). Some of the *niggunim*, for example *Eshtakhaveh* we sing as the Tunisians do when we bring out the *Sefer Torah*. We can understand that you make some tunes Iraqi because of the place, some Moroccan, some Tunisian. (Personal communication, 2018)

Practitioners from each group chant the text slightly differently, although the text is always the same. Where they might differ is in the application of *teamim*, the cantillation marks that were set by the Masoretes in the tenth century. My colleagues and predecessors in ethnomusicology have documented some of the nuances in biblical cantillation across North Africa, from the Algiers style (Aïm 2018) to Tetouan style (Tasat 1993) to Djerba style (Lachmann 1940) to attendant performance techniques like chironomy (Webster-Kogen 2022). In each rite, the tune for the *teamim* varies, with the Ashkenazi and Moroccan traditions operating primarily on a principle of note clusters comprising a mark, while the

[28] There are distinct cantillation styles across North Africa, but he refers here to Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew, which is the norm in Israel among all but ultra-Orthodox Jews. Lemmel himself received his rabbinic ordination in the UK, where taught pronunciation would be Ashkenazi like the pronunciation of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel. For Sephardic Jews, pronunciation of the letter *tav* as *saf* would be confusing and difficult to follow, for example.

Eastern Mediterranean traditions operate more according to dictates of maqam (Kligman 2009). Whereas in France, synagogues distinguish between the rites of Algiers, Oran and Constantine, plus Tunisian and Ashkenazi,[29] Tziyon Lev's Shabbat liturgy is generally just called, in French, *Sepharade*. The style of chanting is, likewise, diverse in its variety.

The scroll at Tziyon Lev, though, is not Moroccan or Tunisian or even from the Holy Land, but Iraqi. The community was founded by Iraqi Jewish immigrants in 1950, its membership steadily declining over subsequent decades. By 2014 when Rabbi Lemmel visited the location, it hadn't been used in some time and as he described, he found *tefillin* (phylacteries, for weekday morning prayers) that had been eaten by moths. The Iraqi scroll remains, so this pan-North African Francophone group of new Israeli citizens chant every week from an upright scroll mounted in silver. One often finds Moroccan scrolls mounted in silver across France, so the scroll is hardly out of place at Tziyon Lev, and Rabbi Lemmel's next words suggest the power that the scroll has to erase difference between people in time and place:

> I couldn't tell the difference before, and now I can tell the difference between Tunisian, Moroccan, Algerian – it is obvious. Moroccans have a way of doing, of speaking, little differences. Tunisians are the ones making everything big and give to everyone, the Algerians are always the most French, they feel more French than anyone, Moroccans are more traditional and keep all the customs (*minhagim*). These are little differences that you can find. In France, we didn't know these differences. (Personal communication, 2018)

For Rabbi Lemmel, the liturgy is a mode of communication between Jews of different backgrounds, and the familiarity with and fondness for local customs will motivate people to

[29] See https://www.consistoire.org/liste-communautes/ (Accessed July 21 2021).

participate in synagogue life. The chanting of the Torah is a practice that connects Jews from all over the world, and from across generations – as Jeffrey Summit puts it, vertically in time and horizontally in space (2016: 13). Lemmel is not so concerned with the provenance of the scroll or of congregation members – he is interested in making a service viable and in putting the Torah to good use. In this final example, I would frame the attitude to the Torah scroll as an everyday use approach – unemotional, untheorized, and pragmatic: The Torah scroll's importance and function is that it keeps the congregation together through their use of it to work as a viable community.

Taking the first part of Lemmel's words, though, "I couldn't tell the difference before and now I can tell the difference," one discerns an additional idiosyncrasy that perhaps further distinguishes Israel from other cases where a Torah scroll is used as part of the service frequently (as is the case in France, for example). I heard across several interviews this unusual framing about movement to Israel changing Jewish experience from a past experience to the present. The movement across space of Torah scrolls is also movement across time – across history (that is, life in the diaspora) to, for some, sort-of end times (that is, return to the Holy Land), and the Torah scrolls are a reminder of the interplay of time and space in ritual. A circuit through the Sephardic synagogues in London, for example, would yield scrolls that have made the journey from Israel, North Africa, Baghdad, the Netherlands, the Ottoman Empire, and beyond. For the communities that hold these scrolls, these places of origin are not just geographic places, but key moments from a long exile in which powerful empires hosted Jews as middlemen, and the Torah protected them. So when Rabbi Lemmel says that he didn't know the difference before, he refers technically to how the Jews of Tunisia differed from the Jews of Morocco. In a more profound way, though, relating to the multivalent meaning of the Torah scroll to Jewish communities, learning to tell the difference between communal practice is, for anyone, part of a daily process of engaging with

migration, commerce and folklore that characterizes the centuries-long circulation of people, ritual and material culture.

Conclusion

The processes of guarding, displaying and chanting from Torah scrolls serve as a reminder that religious ritual is subject to the regulations of a ruling power. The scrolls described in this article survived looting, expulsion, and the decline of empires. They tell compelling stories of migration and political entanglements, among which Sephardic Jewish communities can enumerate many more.

The dynamics of trade and power that have facilitated Jewish migration around and across the Mediterranean date back to the *Seghir* scroll from (as legend would have it) the days of Ezra the scribe. Yet they continued apace past the 1734 date on the Pereira Scroll, through today, with Rabbi Lemmel trying to meld North African rites through the prism of French identity. The Torah's text and performance practice remain fixed, but for Jews from Morocco and Tunisia, scrolls can represent a disjuncture between the near-magical elements of ritual and the power dynamics of migration that drive their circulation.

These Torah scrolls are a result of exile and the migration dynamics of Jewish history. They narrate effectively the stress points in identity for Sephardic, Mizrahi, Mediterranean, Iberian and even British Jewry, as those sometimes-discrete but more often overlapping identities more fluidly represent the lives of the Jewish people of its era. I have argued that Torah scrolls are used in a number of different ways in the Sephardic tradition, and that they can be a reminder of Judaism's resilience in North Africa as much as a lamentation of its destruction. When it is used, a Torah scroll breathes life into a community, and when it is displayed, it narrates the rise or decline of that community. My reading of North African Torah scrolls and their performance practice is a preliminary attempt to write Torah scrolls

into North African history, and to give space to their voice that articulates the Jewish approach to ritual, memory, and the future.

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