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### The Children of Yesterday

[Jerusalem Report, The](#), [Dec 20, 1999](#) by [Rose-Lynn Fisher](#)

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Like so many others, my grandparents abandoned their history as soon as they arrived to begin fresh lives as Americans; the legacy of many of my generation was thus a clean, but empty slate. Among my relatives differing versions of the family history circulate. I was told for example, that my great-grandfather came to Romania from Morocco or Egypt, but whether his journey was one-way or round trip is anyone's guess.

Tradition deficient, I have always been drawn to lands where continuity governs time. I traveled through Morocco in 1995 and 1998 to explore the nature of Jewish presence in a Muslim land. Hearing accounts from people there and abroad, I learned about a way of life that included reciprocity and respect between Jewish and Muslim neighbors, amid wealth or austerity and hard work.

Hosted and guided by Jews and Muslims with a spirit of openness and generosity, in urban and rural areas, I observed a way of life infused with faith. And slowly I come to understand how layered and complex is the experience of the Moroccan Jews. There is no one truth that summarizes the situation of their lives in Morocco, their reasons for leaving, and their experiences beginning anew in Israel and other lands.

Among the small remaining population of Jews, which numbers less than 6,000, the tradition of the hillula (revelry) thrives, reuniting communities from Morocco and abroad in sanctity and celebration on the anniversary of the death of a great tzaddik, or holy man. Throughout the land are tombs of hundreds of tzaddikim – from ornate mausoleums to great piles of stones, in cities and villages, distant dunes and oases. Many of the tzaddikim are also venerated by Muslims. At the hillula of Rabbi David Ou-Moshe, near Agouim, and elsewhere, the signs of reverence transcend religious boundaries.

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Compelled by the desert, I was particularly drawn to the Tafilalet and Draa valley regions bordering the Sahara. The first time, in 1995, I traveled alone. I went back in 1998 with ethnographer/author Nissim Krispil to photograph the Berber villages where Jews had lived until the mid 1960s.

Village elders described their former neighbors with remarkable clarity and detail. Their memories were often fond and poignant, recalling friendship and community.

We were welcomed into villagers' homes and escorted through the mellahs (Jewish quarters), entering abandoned Jewish homes and converted synagogues once bustling with community, now empty and silent, or reinhabited. There is less and less apparent Jewish evidence here. Village life is in transition to a modern world. And as the elders, the keepers of memory, reach the end of life, their wisdom and recollections will be lost forever.

One day in a mellah in the Draa, my colleague asked a little boy if he knew who used to live here. "Yes," the boy replied. "The children of yesterday."

**Rose-Lynn Fisher** is an award-winning artist and photographer based in Los Angeles. Her work in Morocco was supported by the Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity in L.A., by Ori Soltes, former director of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C., and sponsored in part by the Amy Adina Schulman Foundation and Kodak. She is currently in Israel, at the Artist's Residence in Herzliyah, and is compiling a book of her photographs, "The Children of Yesterday."

AT THE THRESHOLD OF CHANGE: Yosef (top left), a Jewish resident of Rabat; (above) a boxing gym housed in the former Al-Fasi synagogue in the old mellah, or Jewish quarter of Fez; (left) a 'natural' still life of Jewish ritual objects and mezuzot, as found in the home of a Fez rabbi and scribe  
A LEGACY OF MEMORIES: (Left) A son questions his father about Sidi Taher, a holy man venerated by both Jews and Muslims in the area of Beni Ali in the Draa valley. (Below) Handprints on the door of a former synagogue in the Draa valley. The hands, known as hamsa, or five, grace homes throughout Morocco, Muslim and Jewish alike, as protection against the evil eye.

(Bottom) Interior of an abandoned Jewish home in the mellah of Aslim in the Draa valley.

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