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EXHIBIT RECAPTURES A JEWISH-MUSLIM LEGACY

by **John Railey**

Moroccan Muslims and Jews stare out of black-and-white photos in an exhibit opening at Wake Forest University next week.

An elderly Jewish grocer stands with Muslim friends in Rich, a town in the High Atlas mountains. In another photo, Jewish women prepare meals for Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath.

They're images of a rich culture rapidly fading. For centuries, Jews and Muslims lived together in Morocco, peacefully, for the most part. But since the 1950s, Jews have been leaving Morocco for varied reasons, and a country once home to about 400,000 Jews now has only about 4,000, said Rose-Lynn Fisher, the Los Angeles photographer who created the exhibit.

In one photo, a Jewish shrine to a rabbi of the early 20th century stands alone against a desert backdrop. Photos of Muslims in the exhibit outnumber those of Jews.

The exhibit is called "Drinking from the Same Well: Jewish and Muslim Coexistence in Morocco," but that coexistence is becoming a memory across Morocco as Jews leave the country.

Still, a special legacy lingers from the kinship between the Muslims and the Jews. The Muslims tell the stories of their departed Jewish friends, keeping their history alive. That's good news in a world where most of us focus on our own histories and neglect those of others, one where we hear too much about bloodshed between Jews and Muslims and countless others of varied backgrounds.

Fisher is Jewish, the 48-year-old descendant of folks who emigrated from Eastern Europe in the early 1900s. She had always been fascinated with Morocco, she said, as well as with the Jews from Spain and the Holy Land who long ago moved to Morocco.

Fisher traveled to Morocco in 1995 and 1998. She shot photos of Jews returning to Morocco to join Jews there for hiloulas, or memorial events for revered rabbis.

At these events, she said, the Jews celebrate and pray for blessings.

Some Jews left Morocco for Israel, which was created in 1948. Others moved to other countries for better jobs. Still others feared anti-Semitism after Morocco gained its independence from France in 1956.

The Jews from Morocco moved to Israel, France, the United States and Canada. The remaining Jews told her the story of their people in Morocco, and so did Muslims. Village elders nostalgically recited the stories of where Jews had lived and worked and who their children were. In one of Fisher's photos, an elder tells a child about Jewish neighbors of days gone by.

Some of those children are already conveying the story of the Jews of Morocco in their own way. Fisher said that one Moroccan boy called the Jews who had left his country "the children of yesterday."

Person-to-person

Fisher's exhibit left me with a bittersweet feeling.

It is inspiring that Muslims are preserving the Jewish past in Morocco, but it's sad that this model of coexistence is vanishing as Jews leave.

But such coexistence lives on.

We hear a lot about bloody clashes between people of different religious, ethnic and racial backgrounds. But we don't hear enough about all the people from different backgrounds who quietly coexist. It happens in Morocco, with its long reputation for openness, and it happens across our land and in pockets throughout the world.

"You can't take things for granted," Fisher said.

"But it's true that when it's person-to-person or heart-to-heart, people left to their own devices are basically going to get along."

The photo exhibit will open Friday at the Museum of Anthropology, Wake Forest University. Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. through Feb. 14. Fisher will give a preview lecture Wednesday at 7 p.m. at the museum, and two other lectures will follow on subsequent dates. All events are free and open to the public. For more information, call the museum at 758-5282.



REMEMBRANCE: This photo of a shrine to a rabbi is among those in the exhibit "Drinking From the Same Well: *Jewish and Muslim Coexistence in Morocco.*"



A Jewish grocer stands outside his store with Muslim neighbors in Rich, Morocco