



PROJECT MUSE®

Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco by
Aomar Boum (review)

Nina Lichtenstein

Journal of Jewish Identities, Issue 8, Number 1, January 2015, pp. 214-215
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jji.2015.0007>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/565908>

Aomar Boum. *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. Pp. 220. Cloth. \$40. ISBN 978-0-8047-8851-9.

Ibrahim Nouhi, one of Aomar Boum's informants and owner and curator of a small museum in the oasis of Akka, in the Anti-Atlas region of southern Morocco, says he has a mission. "People are only getting one story these days. They need to know that the world is more complex than what the media feeds them." (212) His small, dusty museum is his private collection of archives that gives a voice to the Jewish experience and contribution to his home region, once home to a thriving community of Jews. With Boum's efforts culminating in *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco*, Ibrahim has found a partner, another defiant native Moroccan who, despite the current taboo on Muslims engaging in research about Jews, aims to map out the historical shifts in Muslim attitudes and perceptions toward Jews in local, national, and global contexts. *Because the world of memory is more complex than what the media feeds us.*

Imagine a Jewish population in Morocco of between 250,000 and 350,000 souls, reduced to fewer than 3,000 in less than 70 years. Outside the major cities, where the few remaining Jews cling to a semblance of their communities' former splendor, ghost-town remnants of once crowded homes and busy shops now lay deserted, entire neighborhoods uninhabited, synagogues in ruins and cemeteries neglected. Most of Morocco's Jews have immigrated to Israel, many to France, some to Canada, a few to South America. Here, Boum reminds us, they have sought lives free of anti-Jewish sentiments and with the ability to move about freely—to visit Israel if they so choose—without fear such as was experienced in a country that had become increasingly Islamized and radicalized, despite its historical modus operandi of "protection of 'its' Jews" and peaceful coexistence.

The radical hemorrhage of the dynamic and deeply rooted ethnic and religious group that the Jews of Morocco represented for more than two millennia left an enormous vacuum in the country's society and culture. In his study, Boum, himself a native of Morocco's southern pre-Saharan landscape, embarks on what can only be seen as a brave one man's journey, as he reaches out to four generations of his Muslim brothers to gain a better understanding of how they remember and imagine their former Jewish neighbors, business associates, and friends.

Boum's study is much more than interviews and encounters, however. In the course of six chapters, he takes the reader through the various stages of Morocco's rapidly changing political and social landscape. In chapter one, Boum explains how early colonial narratives influenced ideas and opinions about the Jews of Morocco, and about the ambiguous place they occupied as mediators between the French colonial enterprise and the Moroccan culture and people. In chapters two and three the author juxtaposes life outside and inside the mellah, and coins the term "legal syncretism" to represent the tool Jews employed in order to navigate the social and political restrictions

imposed on them outside, compared to the protection and autonomy they enjoyed inside the city walls. Keeping a focus on the southern rural hamlets, it is noted how the Jews were agents of change, in a time when Muslims were more likely to resist Western influences brought in at the time of the French Protectorate. In chapter four, he offers a critique of early Moroccan nationalism's failure to include Jews after independence as one way to understand Jewish anxieties and emigration. Here Boum also seeks to explain the role of Zionism as the perfectly timed antidote to the exclusionary discourse Moroccan Jews were witnessing in the early days of Moroccan nation building. In chapter five, Boum looks at the notion of Jews as "shadow citizens" in independent Morocco, as demonstrated in the state funded Jewish Museum of Morocco in Casablanca, where the static Jewish artifact has come to represent a glorious past in a tacit display of memory politics, avoiding controversial topics. Here the author also focuses on how the press is used in the production and dissemination of ideas of nationalist ideologies vis-à-vis the Palestinian question, Jewish emigration, and Arab wars with Israel. Finally, in chapter six, we learn how youth debate Jewish Morocco in a rather sobering account of rapidly changing cyber culture's successful ventures with net-intifada and e-jihad, where "hactivism," a new form of internet activism, has earned them international notoriety. With nuance, Boum explains how the advent of the Internet and cyber communities has replaced the traditional role of authority of family, government, and traditional community in the re-writing of memory and its ownership.

Like Ibrahim (the museum curator in Akka), Boum's mission has been to offer counternarrative to the nationally promoted concept of *'ayn mika*, meaning, "things that might be important should be ignored because of the trouble the observer can experience if he notices them." (110) This study has as its chief goal revealing the complexities of identities and diverse historical narratives as the author seeks to challenge the taboo of who writes about the politics of memory, *despite* the trouble that might be experienced by the observer. Though academically rigorous in its level of research and scholarly in tone, *Memories of Absence* is enjoyable and engaging as it brings the reader into what feels like casual contact with Muslim Moroccans today. And despite youths' overall negative imagining of Jews and their inability to divorce opinions about contemporary politics and conflicts from the memory of Jews who used to be their grandparents' neighbors, the older generations—those who had first-hand and often intimate experience with Jews in Morocco—remember them as individuals with shared stories and as contributing members of a society now poorer without them.

I would like to see Boum's book translated to French and Arabic, and Ibrahim's collections digitized and turned into an online museum. Imagine the potential reach of their message.

Nina Lichtenstein, University of Connecticut

