

The North African Jewish Collection

With the acquisition of manuscripts from North Africa over the last 15 years, the Yale library is becoming a center for the study of North African Jewry. The library's holdings include manuscripts from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. The heart of the collection, however, is the material relating to the Jews of Morocco. Moroccan Jewry was and still is the largest and most influential in the region. It has a long and illustrious history that goes back to Greco/Roman times and over the centuries the community produced many noted scholars, rabbis, poets, physicians, men of commerce, and statesmen. Maimonides came there as a young man with his family and settled for a time in Fez (or Fas as it is sounded in Arabic) around 1160. Not only were Jews found in all the large urban centers, they also lived in the small villages of the Atlas Mountains and beyond. The community grew even larger with the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1498. Given the proximity of the Iberian Peninsula to Morocco, many fled there and rebuilt their lives and their communities. The language spoken by the new arrivals and their descendants was called *Haketiya*, a form of Judeo-Spanish unique to North Africa. The indigenous Jewish community spoke Judeo-Arabic in its many regional dialects. . . . The two communities referred to each other as *toshavim*, the natives, and *megorashim*, the expelled ones. The *megorashim* settled mostly but certainly not exclusively, in the coastal cities and engaged in trade and commerce. Most of the Jewish population of North Africa immigrated in the mid-20th century to Israel and a smaller number left for France. As a result of this mass exodus of Jews from that part of the world, their culture and languages are in danger of dying out. The native speakers are by now old and the younger generation hardly know them anymore. It is therefore important to collect material that documents the history of Jewish life in North Africa. We began collecting North African manuscripts by chance and later by design. Many years ago, at the beginning of my tenure at Yale, Moshe Rosenfeld, a dealer from Jerusalem I suspect some of you know, offered me a collection of documents from the collection of Yamin HaKohen, chief rabbi of Tangier in the early part of the 20th century. He then offered us more manuscripts and we were on our way. Over the years the collection kept getting bigger and bigger and we began purchasing from other sources including auctions. We are still adding to the collection as opportunities arise. We currently have about 2000 documents..

Yale's collection contains manuscripts from all the major centers of Jewish life in Morocco. These include, Fez, Marrakesh, Meknes, Tetuan, Tangier, Casablanca, Mogador (also known as Essaouira), Debdou, Rabat/sale, and Sefrou. There is also material from many smaller and less well-known towns and villages. The documents consist of manuscripts on legal, rabbinic, business, marriage and divorce, personal and professional matters,. It is also contains liturgy, poetry, kabbalah, amulets and folk remedies of all kinds, and folk tales. The documents are in Hebrew, Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, Haketiya, French and Spanish. They date from the late 16th to the mid-twentieth centuries and represent a treasure-trove of primary source material for the study of the culture, religious life, and languages of a civilization that has all but disappeared.

Recognizing the importance of the documents and the inability of staff and local scholars to read and understand them. We needed a scholar of Jewish North Africa to work with us on the manuscripts. In order to secure funding for such a scholar, I approached the Program in Judaic Studies under the chairmanship of Professor Steven Fraade and requested financial assistance for this project. The Program has been most generous to my various projects in the past but this is

by far the largest request I ever made of it. The scholar I had in mind was Professor Moshe Bar-Asher of the Hebrew University. He taught at Yale several years ago and was aware of our North African collection and in addition knew our faculty and library staff. After consulting with the faculty, Professor Fraade informed me that they agreed to assist us. Having secured the funding, Professor Fraade and I approached Professor Bar-Asher with our proposal and he agreed to come and work with us. He is uniquely qualified to work on documents from Jewish North Africa. He is in fact one of the world's leading scholars in the field. Now emeritus, he chaired the Department of Hebrew Language (1981–83) and the Institute for Jewish Studies (1983–86) at the Hebrew University. Bar-Asher is currently president of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. He was born in Morocco and his father was one of the great scholars of a genre on biblical exegesis known as the Sharch. Not only is Bar-Asher familiar with all the various dialects of Judeo-Arabic spoken by North African Jews, he also has in-depth knowledge of their culture and way of life. He has been coming to Yale twice a year for the last four years in order to review, decipher and translate the manuscripts so that we might provide short summaries of their contents in English. It has been a privilege to work with him. His assistance has enabled us to add a depth and detail to the finding aid that would not have been possible without him. Plus, we could depend on the accuracy of his information without reservation.

I had one staff member working with me but given the quantity of documents, I needed another assistant. In order to get the funding for another person, I applied for an Arcadia Foundation grant through the Yale library. For those of you who are not familiar with the Arcadia Foundation, it is based in London and instituted by the Rausing family about five years ago. At the time, they gave about a million dollars each to selected libraries to be distributed to projects within the library that the University Librarian deemed worthy. Yale was among the libraries selected. The Arcadia Foundation was particularly interested in funding projects that would work on saving endangered languages and our project fit quite well into that goal. In our case, Judeo-Arabic and *Haketiya*. I also received a second year grant from the Arcadia Fund in order to preserve and conserve selected documents, particularly bound ones, that have been requested by scholars. We are now completing our second year which ends on August 30th. Preservation and digitization of the entire collection is a project which will be tackled in the next stage of our work on the collection. However, the Program in Judaic Studies has given us the funds to digitize the six bound manuscripts that underwent conservation this year.

Once I was able to hire an assistant whose work was dedicated to the North African Collection, our work proceeded as follows: as Professor Bar-Asher completed a group of documents, we assigned numbers to each of them, and entered the numbers and the captions that went with them into an Excel chart making sure that the terminology we used was compliant with the terminology used in Archivist Toolkit (AT), the first open source archival data management system to provide broad, integrated support for the management of archives. We were, therefore, in constant communication with Mary Caldera, the Head of Arrangement and Description in Manuscripts and Archives, so that everything was entered properly. Once we completed the Excel chart, we were ready to transfer the data to AT. This was done by Mary with a global transfer. In this way we created the finding aid. We now have to maintain it by adding new manuscripts as they come in to the library. Luckily, our relationship with Professor Bar-Asher continues and he still comes about twice a year to Yale and deciphers the new documents for us.

In addition to his work on the processing of our manuscripts, Professor Bar-Asher, again with the support of the Program in Judaic Studies organized two workshops in which scholars of Jewish North Africa came to Yale to study the documents. One workshop took place in 2010 and the other in 2012; another is in the works. Attending these workshops were scholars from Israel, France, the United States and Morocco. Each workshop consisted of about twelve participants and there were several scholars that attended both. During the first workshop we also held a day of study open to the public. The format changed somewhat during the second. Instead of conducting a daylong symposium each participant prepared a lecture that he or she presented to the group at the end of each day. They thus also taught each other.

The first workshop resulted in two publications edited by Professor Bar Asher, one in Hebrew and the other in English. The second workshop will result in another two such volumes. The Program in Judaic Studies under the chairmanship of Steven Fraade cannot be thanked enough for the support it has given to the whole undertaking.

I now want to show you a video in which I discuss Yale's collection with Professor Bar-Asher. I will conclude with images of several documents, photos from the second workshop and scenes of Jewish Morocco from the early 20th century.