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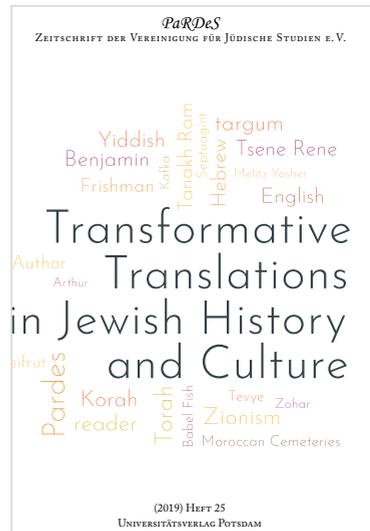
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# Translating Jewish Cemeteries in Morocco

*by Cory Driver*

## **Abstract**

This paper addresses issues of translating both words and rituals as Muslim cemetery keepers care for Jewish graves and recite traditional prayers for the dead in Morocco. Several issues of translation must be dealt with while considering these rare and disappearing practices. The first issue to be discussed is the translation of Hebrew inscriptions into French by cemetery keepers. One cemetery keeper in Meknes has tried to compile an exhaustive index of the names and dates represented on the gravestones under her care. The Muslim guard of the Jewish cemetery in Sefrou, on the other hand, has somewhat famously told visitors differing stories about his ability and willingness to pray the *Kaddish* over the graves of emigrated relatives who cannot return to mark an anniversary death. These practices provide the context for considering how the act of Muslims caring for Jewish graves creates linguistic and ritual translations of traditional Jewish ancestor care.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper seeks to provide thick descriptions of translation practices conducted by Muslim guards at Jewish cemeteries in Morocco with an eye toward describing their reasons for and outcomes of such practices.<sup>1</sup> In Morocco, Muslim keepers of Jewish cemeteries seek to preserve the country's religious and multi-ethnic history by means of recarving Hebrew language inscriptions on Jewish graves. Because of the wear on tombstones as well as the differing levels of familiarity among the cemetery custodians with Hebrew names and block script, this task is not always straight-forward. Moreover, as cemetery keepers occasionally pray Jewish prayers in Hebrew that they do not fully

<sup>1</sup> This article springs and adapts from interviews and research that underly Cory Driver, *Muslim Custodians of Jewish Spaces in Morocco: Drinking the Milk of Trust* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

understand at the graves of their charges, questions about efficacy of translation of language and practice become pertinent.

I conducted this research in cemeteries because they are a material space where mourners and caretakers address issues of nostalgia, friendship, loss, ritual responsibility, authenticity, and authority. Even though the translation acts and motives of translators are my main concerns, the materiality of the graveyards remains vitally important to the translation, which enables and elicits the translations at all.

The Muslims translating Jewish words and rituals in Moroccan Jewish cemeteries are a vital link between now-vanished Jewish life in almost completely abandoned centers of Jewish settlement in Morocco, and the Moroccan Jewish diaspora in Europe, Israel and North America. The Muslim cemetery keepers stood out from their communities because of their unique abilities to perform Jewish languages and Jewish prayers.<sup>2</sup> The re-engraving of Hebrew inscriptions on graves and the recitation of Jewish prayers by Muslims are not uncomplicated and require both translations across languages and across cultural-religious boundaries. This work addresses that flow of language and ritual across religious boundaries by focusing on Muslim cemetery keepers' abilities to preserve the physical and linguistic remnants of Jewish religious communities at a place where the margins of religious language and practice are porous.

## **2. Cemetery Importance and Saint Veneration in Morocco**

While it is important to note that Jewish saintly figures and their tombs are and have been venerated across the world,<sup>3</sup> the intensity and formality of devotion to saints and expectation that the deceased would actively intervene in human affairs in Morocco has long been a special focus of Moroccan

<sup>2</sup> For more on unusual persons shaping their communities in Morocco, cf. Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Erica T. Lehrer, *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Heath Lowry, *In the Footsteps of the Ottomans: A Search for Sacred Spaces and Architectural Monuments in Northern Greece* (Istanbul: Bahcesehir University Press, 2009); Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Warren Miller, *Jewish Cemeteries, Synagogues and Monuments in Slovenia* (Washington, D.C.: United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, 2005).

Jewish scholarship.<sup>4</sup> For his book *Saint Veneration Among the Jews in Morocco*, Issachar Ben-Ami interviewed Moroccan Israelis about the saints they continued to venerate after emigrating, and about the saints whose tombs they had visited before their emigration.<sup>5</sup> Yoram Bilu documented the Moroccan-Israeli devotees of Moroccan holy men who witness manifestations of the saints through visions and dreams.<sup>6</sup> Both of these studies were conducted in Israel with Moroccan Israelis, rather than with the few Jews still living in Morocco, or with Moroccan Muslims.

Moroccan Jews who demonstrated spiritual power (*baraka*) to heal disease or teleport across vast distances instantly, were recognized as saints, usually after their death. On the yearly anniversary of the saint's death, a *hillulah* (pilgrimage) to his or her – Ben-Ami identified over twenty female saints, and I have documented others – tomb is undertaken. The saint is frequently beseeched to intervene with God for the devotees all year. The *hillulah* is the most effective and auspicious time to ask for help. This time of spiritual potency contains the highest likelihood that requests carried to God by a particular saint will be granted. Many saints were recognized prior to their deaths. Living saints were treasured because it was their power to miraculously protect the Jewish community from murderous raids or pogroms. Most *mellahs*

<sup>4</sup> For just a few of the many works on Jewish Moroccan Sainthood, cf. Oren Kosansky, "The Real Morocco Itself: Jewish Saint Pilgrimage, Hybridity, and the Idea of the Moroccan Nation," in *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*, eds. Emily Gottreich and Daniel Schroeter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 341–360; Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); André Levy, "To Morocco and Back: Tourism and Pilgrimage among Moroccan-Born Israelis," in *Grasping Land: Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience*, eds. Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Henry Munson Jr., "Muslim and Jew in Morocco: Reflections on the Distinction between Belief and Behavior," in *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner. Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities*, eds. John A. Hall and Ian Jarive (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 357–379; Norman Stillman, "Saddiq and Marabout in Morocco," in *Jews among Muslims: Communities in the Precolonial Middle East*, eds. Shlomo Deshen and Walter Zenner (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 121–130; Sharon Vance, *The Martyrdom of a Moroccan Jewish Saint* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Issachar Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration Among the Jews of Morocco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Yoram Bilu, *The Saints' Impresarios: Dreamers, Healers, and Holy Men in Israel's Urban Periphery* (Brighton, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

(Jewish quarters) in Morocco had a patron saint who earned the position by saving the residents from destruction by a plague or a rioting Muslim crowd.

Muslims' interactions with Jewish saints were not always to be on the receiving end of their wrath. Ben-Ami helpfully points out that at least one hundred twenty-six Jewish saints were venerated by Muslims in addition to their Jewish devotees.<sup>7</sup> This is due to the saint's healing powers that do not seem to be constrained by ethno-religious boundaries. In Morocco efficacy in providing spiritual blessing is simply more important than whether one is Muslim or Jewish.<sup>8</sup> Muslims venerating saints is well attested to across the Islamic world.<sup>9</sup> It is only relatively recently that fundamentalist pushback against saint veneration in Islam has gained any traction.<sup>10</sup> What seems to be novel and unique to Morocco is Muslim devotion at the tombs of Jewish saints. Living saints may have been patronized by anyone in need of help, but in my research in Egypt, Israel, Uzbekistan, Turkey and India, I have yet to hear of Muslims frequenting the tombs of Jewish saints. However, this "borrowing" of other religions' saints only occurs one way. Muslims request blessings from Jewish saints, but the tiny Moroccan Jewish community would never seek blessings from a Muslim saint.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration*, 131. This number dates back to 1998.

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting example of Muslim, Christian and Hindu women seeking blessings and healings from a living Muslim Sufi saint, cf. Joyce Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Gerald Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-Arabi's Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Valerie Hoffman, "Muslim Women, Sainthood and the Legend of Sayyida Nafisa," in *Women Saints in World Religions*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 127–143; John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Christopher Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyara and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Boston: Brill, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> David Commins, "From Wahhabi to Salafi," in *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change*, eds. Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer, and Stéphanie Lacroix (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2015), 151–166, here 153; John Iskander, "Saint," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Juan Eduardo Campo (New York: Facts of File, 2009), 598–600, here 599.

<sup>11</sup> I am conscious of the assertion that Jews venerated Muslim saints, cf. Louis Voinot, *Pèlerinages judéo-musulmans du Maroc* (Paris: Larose, 1948). Moroccan Jews have venerated Muslim saints in the past, but I have found no evidence of this in my contemporary research. On the contrary, I heard ubiquitous assertions from Moroccan Jews that such a thing would never happen.

Muslim intimacy with the tombs of Jewish saints has shaped the material reality as well as ritual practice, especially since the mass-emigration of the Moroccan Jewish community. Ben-Ami's interviewees described the humble tombs of Jewish saints and the large, ornate tombs of their Muslim counterparts.<sup>12</sup> This distinction has largely disappeared in the years since Ben-Ami's interlocutors emigrated. Jewish heritage tours and pilgrimages necessitate larger facilities to host the massive number of visitors during the *hillulah*. The massive crowds (in some instances for the most popular saints) are a stark contrast to pre-emigration trickle of a few people from surrounding villages visiting only sporadically during the year. Moreover, the small, remaining Jewish communities in Morocco regularly pay for aggrandizement of family tombs.

In addition, building small hotels near the graves, Moroccan cemetery guards also enlarge the saints' tomb on their own accord and at their own cost, albeit with permission of the responsible Jewish communities. A caretaker told me that she wanted pilgrims to have something wonderful to behold, so that they will return and bring more pilgrims (and more money). To that end, she built not only walls and a roof around the saint's grave to protect it from the elements, but she also received permission from the Jewish authority of Marrakech for the protection of graves in her region to construct an adjoining prayer hall with ark, bimah, and stained glass.

Muslims guards do not just change the physical settings in Jewish cemeteries, but they also translate ritual practices into the local ritual vernacular. Ben-Ami pointed out that Muslims use colored candles at the *moussems* (pilgrimages) to their saints<sup>13</sup> but devotees of Jewish saints always used white candles to mark their devotion. I have observed this to be true, generally. At the *hillulah* of Rabbi Isaac Abu Hatsera (murdered in 1912), uncle of Rabbi Israel Abu Hatsera (1889–1984), the Baba Sali (lit. the "Praying Father"), however, visiting Israelis were buying white *and* colored candles sold by the Muslim guards. The Moroccan Jews only used the white candles. The Israeli pilgrims were sufficiently deracinated from their ancestors' traditions that they purchased either kind of candle, not the knowing the historical difference. The Muslim

<sup>12</sup> Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration* 147–170.

<sup>13</sup> Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration* 163, 170.

guards simply sold the visiting Jewish pilgrims all the candles that they had left over, both from previous *hillulahs* and *moussems*.

The translations of language and tradition of saint veneration rituals have flowed back and forth between Muslim and Jewish Moroccans for centuries. Similar trends of westward travel from Southwest Asia led to the establishment of saint veneration in both traditions. While Sufi saints spread interpretive principles of Islamic law from eastward to Morocco, 16<sup>th</sup>-century rabbis traveled from Safed to collect funds for the support of Jews living in the Land, spreading Kabbalah.<sup>14</sup> Several Muslim and Jewish travelers to Morocco demonstrated miraculous powers and upon their deaths during their sojourns, they were recognized as saints. These Muslim and Jewish saints helped link religious thought and practices in Morocco with their respective centers farther east in the Muslim and Jewish world. This shared veneration continued through the rise of the Alaouite dynasty in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial period and post-colonial national self-definition until today. Muslims and Jews have been collaborating and influencing the other's funerary practices for centuries, and this pattern continues. The radical change comes from the mass-emigration of Jews such that Jewish cemeteries and saints' tombs are now under the direct supervision and daily control of Muslims rather than Jews. Muslims now shape and control the language and ritual of Jewish cemeteries and saint veneration without direct input from Jews for long stretches of time.

### 3. Reading and Writing Hebrew Inscriptions in Meknes

While entering the *New Cemetery* of Meknes, Leila, the cemetery keeper, met me at the gate.<sup>15</sup> We greeted each other in the normal manner of strangers, but she seemed curious to know who I was, slightly dubious of my intentions. When I told her that I would be guiding students in my class on a field trip to the cemetery the next day, and I wanted to refresh my memory of the notable graves and make sure that it was permissible to visit, she noticeably relaxed.

Leila plunged into a small building which serves as her domicile as well as a commercial kitchen from which she serves tea and snacks to large tour

<sup>14</sup> Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1998); Harvey Goldberg, "The Zohar in Southern Morocco: A Study in the Ethnography of Texts," in *History of Religions* 29, no. 3 (2000): 233–258.

<sup>15</sup> I have changed the names and identifying details of all people represented in this work to give them some measure of privacy.

groups. When she emerged, she was carrying a large graph paper notebook. She proudly boasted, "I am the best cemetery keeper in all of Morocco. See how I have numbered all the graves and written down all the names, so that when Jews visit, I can show them exactly where their relatives' graves are?"

Her notebook was divided into two sections: one section featured pages of detailed cemetery maps; the other resembled a phonebook with alphabetical names, written in French. Many of the graves have inscriptions in Hebrew and French, but for several Leila has transliterated the Hebrew-only inscription into French for her notebook. She had indexed the graves both by name, as well as by location. She added, "I learned Hebrew while I worked (as a domestic helper, C.D.) in the home of a Jewish couple. When they were about to leave for Israel (to emigrate, C.D.), they asked me to come take care of the graves. I've been here for sixteen years now." In further conversation I learned that her selection had been on behalf of not just the couple for whom she worked, but that the remaining Jewish community in Meknes had agreed that she should be taught sufficient Hebrew to recognize the names on the graves and give orders to craftspeople when the inscriptions needed to be recurred due to erosion or vandalism.

I thanked Leila for her dedication to preserving the material remnant of the Jewish community, and, curious, I asked if we could take a walking tour of the cemetery in order to learn what she knew about the graveyard. She was delighted by the opportunity to showcase her knowledge of Hebrew.

As we walked, she asked if I wanted her to teach me how Jews pray for their dead. Wanting to know what she would say, I agreed, but then I pulled my kippah out of my back pocket she saw my head covering, she said in Moroccan Dialectal Arabic, "*Baqi 'arifti* (oh), you already (or still) know." I pressed her to teach me what she knew anyway. She recited the opening lines of the mourners *Kaddish*, traditionally said by mourners at the grave of their beloved departed. I then asked if she would feel comfortable teaching a few words of *Kaddish* to students the next day as well. Leila paused for a moment and then she asked if the students were *ajrib* (foreigners) or Moroccans. I told her that the class was a mix of both. She happily exclaimed that the next day would be a big day (*nhar kbir*) when she could demonstrate to both Moroccans and foreigners that she, as a Moroccan Muslim woman, could preserve the carvings *and* ritual prayers.

As we continued to walk Leila stopped by an overgrown section of the cemetery and peeled back some dried brush to reveal a barely legible carving on the side of a grave. She asked if I could read the inscription to her. Despite the ravages of time, I read the name and some of the formulaic elements. She seemed impressed and then asked me to read the inscription on the grave that was behind the one I had just read. As I stepped gingerly around the graves as well as thorny plants that had grown up around the graves, Leila took out her notebook and flipped to the page that was corresponding to the location where we stood on her hand-drawn map. The carving was too worn for me to read the full name, but I told her what I thought it said. She turned the notebook to me and showed me as she placed a tick mark next to one of three possible permutations of the family name that she had already recorded. She explained that though she could read most inscriptions and had prayers memorized, she still relied on cemetery visitors who could read Hebrew to help her decipher the names of the graves in the sections of the cemetery that were older, more eroded, and which received fewer visitors who would identify the deceased as family.

Leila told that there is tremendous pressure from the government to clean up and reengrave all the gravestones to make everything look perfect for tourists and pilgrims. She has resisted this pressure because she does not want to have the wrong name carved on a tomb. Other cemetery keepers have much more readily succumbed to the pressure, and cemetery “restoration” efforts, especially in Marrakech, have resulted in the desecration of graves and complete removal of any trace of identifying inscriptions on graves by workmen whose chief aim, it seems, was to provide uniformly flat surfaces which were then painted over with whitewash. Leila was horrified by pictures I showed her of the cemetery “preservation” projects I visited in other cities. She said that only when the vast majority of visitors agreed on what an inscription should say did she order it to be re-engraved.

The authority of cemetery guards to literally change or preserve what names are on graves is stunning. Facility in Hebrew varies by Muslim cemetery keeper. At most, there are a couple hundred Moroccan Muslims with some knowledge of Hebrew, which vary from only recognizing a few letters to being able to read and speak fluently. Leila is a benevolent presence in the Meknes cemetery and resists pressure to make the graves uniformly anonymous. Not all cemetery keepers go to such lengths to preserve unique Hebrew inscriptions over aesthetic uniformity.

#### 4. Translating Language and Ritual in Sefrou

Sefrou holds a special place in the hearts of anthropologists.<sup>16</sup> Cognizant of the decades of anthropological and sociological research conducted in Sefrou, I was concerned about the reception I would find in Sefrou, which has been the subject of anthropological research more frequently than many Sefriwis appreciated. As Paul Hymen's image of a man emphatically motioning that he did not wish to be the subject of a photo (on the cover of Rabinow's 1977 book) makes abundantly clear, anthropologists have frequently neglected the desires of their subjects. Unlike my research elsewhere, many doors, and mouths, shut when my foreignness was noticed.

One telling episode occurred while I was walking around the *mellah* of Sefrou, and saw an elderly woman using a small axe to remove a carving from the lintel above her door. The intricately carved door frame featured two stars of David with an ornate border around them. The exquisite piece was fitted together without nails. Horrified at her actions, I asked the woman why she was destroying something so beautiful. She told me that she was getting rid of "old, Jewish things" so that her house could be "Muslim."<sup>17</sup> I asked her if I could remove and take the piece that she wished removed. (Her hacking away at the carving with an axe was obviously severely taxing her elderly body.) Without turning to see my blue eyes that mark me as a foreigner, she agreed, seizing the opportunity to be rid of the mark of Jewish former residence, and more importantly, to have someone else finish her difficult physical labor.

At that moment, however, a neighbor approached and, assuming that I did not speak Darija, said, "This is one of those foreigners who comes to write about us, and you are going to give him that wood? You should charge him a lot of money!" The old woman looked at me, noticing that I was a foreigner.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed, Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Lawrence Rosen, *The Anthropology of Justice: Law as Culture in Islamic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Susan Slyomovics, "Introduction to Clifford Geertz in Morocco: 'Why Sefrou? Why Anthropology? Why me?'," in *The Journal of North African Studies* 14, no. 3–4 (2009): 317–325, here 317–318; Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz, and Lawrence Rosen, *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society: Three Essays in Cultural Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 8.

<sup>17</sup> The six-pointed star has a long tradition of use by both Muslims and Jews in Morocco, to the extent that historic Moroccan coinage bore it, and it is found in traditional tilework in mosques and madrasahs at least back to the Merenid period. In this instance, however, the old woman was reacting against a symbol of Judaism, not against a Moroccan design.

She said that she would sell me the piece for 20,000 riyals. I did not have the 130 USD that it would have taken to buy the ornate door carving at that time. I watched sadly as she continued hacking it to splinters destined for the oven rather than let a foreign anthropologist complete her difficult task for free.

Twin factors of wanting to translate the house from a Jewish place to a Muslim place and disdain for foreigners who have taken advantage of the people of Sefrou for generations led to the destruction of a beautiful piece of Judaica. It is worth repeating that somehow, removing six-pointed stars would be sufficient to translate space. Non-linguistic symbols of Jewish presence needed to be removed from the old woman's home for its transformation into an authentically Muslim space. Even more important than speedy removal, however, was not missing an opportunity to show a foreigner that the people of Sefrou would not be exploited without remuneration.

## 5. Translating and Praying Others' Prayers

After my sad experience in the *mellah*, I walked to the cemetery and to the tomb of Abba El Baz (1851–1938), the former chief Rabbi of Sefrou. Just as I was approaching the grave to say a few words to my beloved colleagues' ancestor, a voice called out: “*Ash kat-dir hena* (What are you [singular] doing here?)” The cemetery keeper, Hamid, is a big, older man who speaks gruffly. He invited me into the main building of the cemetery, which, like the one in Meknes, acts as a prayer place for Jewish visitors in addition to acting as the place for the keeper to take naps and drink tea out of the sun. In the hot summer Hamid spent his days in the prayer-place, except when he was chasing away vandals or guiding visitors. His most frequent task by far is calling out to embarrass men who climbed through a hole in the cemetery wall to use the graveyard as a toilet.

Hamid treated me to an interesting, albeit inaccurate, retelling of the history of the Sefrou Jewish community. He told me that the refugees from the Spanish expulsion arrived in Sefrou around 1800 CE. I interrupted to point out that the Spanish exiles arrived much earlier than two hundred years prior. He gave me an indifferent shrug and volunteered that maybe there were Jews present earlier, due to the sugar trade. He then discussed Sabbath practices, such as not smoking, and he emphasized the importance of ritually washing hands after leaving the cemetery. He then winked and noted that *mahia* (a

local liquor) drinking was a frequent pleasure of the Jews of Sefrou, and many of their Muslim friends. Hamid pointed out that in the mid-1960s, just before the Six-Day War, Sefrou was home to fifteen thousand Jews and two thousand Moroccans. Those numbers are wildly inaccurate, but there was an especially large Jewish community.<sup>18</sup> Hamid spoke of Jews and Moroccans, instead of Jews and Muslims who lived in Morocco.

Hamid then took me on a tour of the graveyard. The oldest grave that he had known of was from 1018 CE; he said *Miladi* (years) since the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. On these old graves, the inscriptions were quite worn. Hamid said that he was slowly re-carving and repainting the grave markers in Hebrew.

Hamid started to read lengthy grave inscriptions in Hebrew. He later told me that he reads the grave inscriptions and other Hebrew writing around town (though they are rapidly disappearing, like the door carving above), to maintain his reading skills. He said that he also had worked for a Jewish family – the Tobarys – at a gas station in town and they had taught him to read Hebrew when he was not pumping gas. When the last Jewish families were preparing to emigrate from Sefrou, they asked him to guard the cemetery, specifically because he knew how to read Hebrew. He could read the inscriptions and knew who was buried in which grave. Moreover, he could say *Kaddish* over the graves. This last statement, quite frankly, stunned me. For a small amount of money, Hamid was willing to say prayers himself in Hebrew over the graves of deceased Moroccan Jews, even though he himself is Muslim. Unlike Leila, who knew the prayer and was willing to help Jews say it, Hamid said the prayer himself.

## 6. Translating Prayer and the Efficacy of Agents

From a Jewish Halakhic perspective, a Muslim reciting the *Kaddish* begs several questions about the ritual efficacy of prayers and identity of prayers.

In terms of Jewish law (*halakhah*), there is much wrong with Hamid saying *Kaddish*. Hamid is not Jewish. Hamid prays the prayer without a *minyan*. The *Kaddish* blesses God during suffering and seeks life and peace for all Israel. This prayer is a central feature of Jewish liturgy if a *minyan* is present, but

<sup>18</sup> Norman Stillman, *The Language and Culture of the Jews of Sefrou, Morocco: An Ethnolinguistic Study* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1988), 12–13.

in my admittedly atypical experience of conducting research in cemeteries, it is connected most often with rituals surrounding the experiences of death, burial and mourning.<sup>19</sup>

Hamid removed a sheet of paper from his utility vest and read the Hebrew prayer over the grave of his “friend,” Abba El Baz. His pronunciation of the Hebrew was very Moroccan. He confessed that he did not understand all of what he was saying, but he knew he was saying an important Jewish prayer. He said that he was praying to accrue *baraka* (spiritual) power and/or blessing to help the Jews in the graves because their families did not come to say the prayers themselves.

For Hamid, the *Kaddish* was not a part of an extended liturgy. He told me, on the first occasion that we talked, that he prayed *Kaddish* often. On subsequent visits, he mentioned that he only prays a few times a year. The last time I spoke with him years after our first meeting, he acknowledged that he has only prayed it a few times. The differing responses over time notwithstanding, Hamid still has said *Kaddish*, albeit in a stand-alone non-*halakhically* correct way. It should be remembered though that reciting and meditating on the *Kaddish* outside of normative strictures of *halakhah* has long been a spiritually and emotionally effective act.<sup>20</sup>

Hamid’s few clients rely on his pronunciation of *Kaddish* to fulfill their cultural obligations to offer prayers at the graves of their family members. Hamid’s prayers place him, according to his clients, in the well-established role of a *shaliach* (agent), for doing a righteous act. According to *halakhah*, many *mitzvot* can be performed by a *shaliach*, even if the agent is not Jewish. Indeed, the first *shaliach* in the Bible is Abraham’s servant. A *shaliach* may not fulfill a *mitzvah* for a patron if in so doing, other *halakhic* injunctions are violated, however. Thus, a lone non-Jew saying a prayer that requires a *minyan* at the grave of an unrelated Jew would not normally be considered efficacious in fulfilling the demands for filial piety.

I must return to the prayers that I have observed, however. Hamid demonstrated his skills in reading Hebrew. It seemed to me during our conversations that he truly cared about the people whose mortal remains he guarded. He

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Kaddish,” in *Kaddish and Other Poems* (New York: City Lights Publishers, 2001); Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

told me stories about the residents of some of the graves as we toured the cemetery, while using his finger to trace their names as he read the inscription that he had re-carved over the years. He rested his hand on their graves as he told me what the person had been like as a young woman, or how the person had fought with his brothers, or how another grave resident had been a cranky old lady.

Most importantly, the original printed and laminated *Kaddish* that he has since lost, stands out. The piece of paper did prove that someone had made some effort to send it to him in order to recite at an ancestor's grave. Hamid found the *Kaddish* online, word processed it and printed it out is incredibly unlikely. A Jewish visitor to the cemetery leaving it for him to find seems equally unlikely. The prayer was on a piece of paper, not part of a prayer book. It existed alone, deracinated from its normal liturgical context. It was perfectly suited for a stand-alone act of Jewish piety.

Like a prayer isolated from a prayer book, Hamid's act of praying was separate from its liturgical context, recited by a Muslim who offered prayers over his deceased friends and clients. On the other hand, the context of his *Kaddish* remains profoundly Jewish and communal. While Hamid fulfilled a true act of spiritual kindness (*hesed shel emet*) for the deceased on behalf of their relatives, he also performs acts of caring for his friends in his Jewish holy site. He stands at the literal center of Jewish life, death, and traditions in Morocco.

I have heard Hamid say *Kaddish* only twice over a period of several years. The first time he said it was at the grave of Abba El Baz. I had met him only a half hour earlier. The prayer was certainly occasioned by my visit of the cemetery. As I was coming to grips with Hamid's assertion that he prayed in Hebrew over the graves, we came to the grave of his friend and he started praying. The term "friend" must be understood loosely, as Abba El Baz died in 1938. Hamid was no older than 70 when I met him would never have met the Rabbi El Baz, whose grave is the closest to where Hamid takes his naps. The physical intimacy of their resting places, rather than lived friendship, has allowed for the "friendship" to develop. Hamid frequently patted the tomb as he passed it or even rested his arms and head on it, and sometimes held a one-sided conversation with Rabbi El Baz's tomb.

Hamid's praying was a performance for me to see at first. On subsequent trips, I have witnessed him pause during his cleaning to take a sheet out of his utility vest to silently mouth a few words, which are presumably a prayer of some sort.

The words on the paper have changed over the years. The writing was Hebrew at first, but I have also seen Arabic orthography that was transliterated Hebrew, as well as something transliterated into Latin characters that I did not recognize.

That Hamid does not completely understand the prayers that he says is important to him. The indeterminacy of what he prays allows him to view these prayers as spiritually beneficial to the deceased Jews for whom he is responsible without requiring him to confess or believe something that he, as a Muslim, cannot do in good conscience. In this, he is comfortably situated in a long line of Moroccans, both Muslims and Jews, for whom *baraka* transmission and venerating honored and beloved dead are more important than ethno-religious categories.

Praying transliterated Jewish prayers that he does not translate completely does not challenge Hamid's religious sensibility or change his religious identity. He draws a clear line separating himself from the community of his Jewish friends. But he is a crucial bridge for translations of language and ritual between communities. His social identity is thoroughly interwoven with his work in carving Hebrew characters and saying Hebrew-language prayers over Jewish graves. Hamid has defined his life by doing quasi-Jewish acts for Jews.

## 7. Conclusions

Hebrew is not dead in Moroccan graveyards. It is not exactly alive either. Muslim Moroccans who were consciously selected and trained to be able to perform enough Hebrew to accomplish their tasks have adapted their skills to efforts not necessarily envisioned by their language instructors. Leila carefully transliterates and translates the inscriptions on graves into her notebook-index of the cemetery, but her Hebrew skills are insufficient to record the carvings of several of the graves. Hamid says prayers that he does not fully understand in order to fulfill others' felt obligations to their deceased relatives, as well as to show devotion to his "friends."

The goal shared between Muslims and Jews, it seems, is to honor the dead. But the limits of language and comprehensibility are useful to Hamid, who can plausibly deny understanding all of what he says while at the same time he markets his ability to say prayers for clients. The words of the prayers themselves, when pronounced, but untranslated are efficacious to pronounce blessings in Moroccan Jewish cemeteries.