North African, Jewish and Woman on the Big Screen: 
A Different Minority Narrative 

by 
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This paper proposes to add a visual component to the inquiry of Sephardi identities as constructed across genres in different categories or forms of art and culture, by looking at how two specific films, La Petite Jérusalem [Little Jerusalem] (2005) and Le Chant des Mariées [The Wedding Song] (2008), contribute to the construction of Sephardi identities in France, specifically, and on the international arena generally, as they expand the commonly received notions of what Jewish identity and experience “is and has been”. I propose to examine the filmmaker’s choices of place – the modern day Parisian immigrant suburb of Sarcelles, and Tunisia on the eve of the German invasion in 1942, as writer and director Karin Albou, herself a French Jew of Algerian background, gives intimate portraits of the complex construction of feminine identity, drawing on the vision of women from the inside of houses, through windows, courtyards and feminine spaces such as the hammam and the mikvah. 

By adding this different minority narrative to the rich French tradition of films created by second generation immigrants, the audience learns that Jewish identity and experience is not only defined by one central narrative, typically Ashkenazi and Euro-centric, and often with a focus on the Holocaust as the epitomizing Jewish trauma, but rather, that Jewish identity and experience not only can be, but is and has always been plural and sometimes divergent within, yet analogous to narratives by other exilic and diasporic peoples, without. The Sephardi identities constructed in films like these are based on lived identities actively engaged in (French and North African) history, in the very material realities of history’s unfolding, past and present. As film can provide a forum for education and critique through the tradition of social documentary, Albou’s films produce meaning significant in that they function as complex Sephardi cultural documents. Through her choices of settings such as modern day Paris and Tunisia in the 1940’s, Albou uses two historically realistic locales and circumstances which place the characters in realities rich in
their significance to Sephardi identity. As viewers we are thus invited to understand the character’s motivations and actions as they evolve in places and spaces historically relevant to Sephardi Jews.¹

An important issue for us to keep in mind, which is also the focus of Jewish associations and organizations such as ASF (American Sephardi Federation), JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa), and the Levantine Project, to name a few, is the fact that the recent burgeoning of Sephardi and Mizrahi cultural expressions, be it literature, film, music, art, or other, is finally claiming its place as an active, self-defining, dynamic and heterogeneous entity in the wider, general discourse on Jewish history, culture and identity. In 1996 when Jordan Elgrably, co-founder of then Ivri-NASAWI, the New Association of Sephardi/Mizrahi Artists and Writers International, now the Levantine Project, lamented “Until recently, we have been taught to see ourselves as shadowy figures on the margins of Jewish society – the relics of a colorful history, excellent for classroom review but absolutely irrelevant today”², he and his colleagues envisioned creating a forum for Sephardi/Mizrahi cultural relevance in today’s world. Films like La Pétite Jérusalem and Le Chant des Mariées both represent such artistic expressions, participating in current discourses on gender and ethnicity both within a Jewish framework as well as in relation to other ethnic and religious minorities, and finally, in a boarder cultural, historical and political context.

La Petite Jérusalem deals with the daily struggles of alienation and emotional/spiritual survival as experienced by two sisters in a Tunisian Jewish Orthodox family. The film also explores issues regarding the very acute social/national debates in France concerning the co-existence of Arabs and Jews and the many challenges around immigrant politics. We are introduced to eighteen year old university student of philosophy Laura, who lives with her widowed mother (only known in the film as “Memi”), religious sister and brother in-law and their four small children in the suburban Paris working class neighborhood of Sarcelles, where Jews and Muslims live in dreary high-rises, distinctively separated as ethnic groups while

sharing experiences in their daily existence at work, in the neighborhood or on the metro. Laura, a devout student of Kant has picked up one of his disciplines – walking every day at the same time along the same route, and we see her in an ongoing existential battle between the budding desires of her young adult body and the ideal Kantian view of the priority of a life committed to the matters of the mind. She is deeply involved in her studies, and often sits at a small desk in her room consumed in her readings in the modest apartment teeming with children at play and the noise of a busy household. While the older sister Mathilde and her husband Ariel try to survive his infidelity and what seems to be their sexual incompatibilities within the context of Orthodoxy, Laura struggles to balance her religious upbringing with her increasingly complex and secular views and her yearning for physical love. She uses philosophy as a tool to create a manageable distance between herself and her own emotions and reality, and suffers with the realization that Kant’s mantra is not protecting her against her own intense and painful desires. She is seen by her family as a disrespectful rebel when she seems to lose interest in their religious traditions and falls in love with Djamel, an Algerian-Muslim illegal immigrant co-worker (whom she furtively passes daily on her walk), and thus challenges the patriarchal rules of Ariel, her brother in-law. Looking to up the odds for Laura gaining interest in a Jewish medical student, the family’s matriarch, whose memory is still profoundly anchored in the Magreb, burns *bkhor* or incense while eavesdropping on Laura’s phone conversation with the preferred bachelor, as well as places a talisman, a *chamsa*, under Laura’s bed, assured by her friend in synagogue that this will take care of the love trouble. Ironically, when Laura accidentally finds the *chamsa*, she takes it and carries it with her and seems to look for it to work in her favor as a force helping her pursue Djamel. When Djamel wants to introduce Laura to his family, and they skeptically prod the young couple about her background, her name and whether or not she speaks Arabic, it becomes clear that their union will not be welcomed by his family either. In a desperate attempt to escape her pain when Djamel later tells her he cannot chose her over his family, Laura swallows a handful of her sister’s sleeping pills, and passes out in what one can only assume is a failed suicide attempt. Laura’s mother again turns to the comforts of familiar ritual of burning incense, around her recovering daughter’s bed. While it may be reasonable to label this ritual superstitious and not as part of any Ashkenazi Jewish tradition, it is important not to simply dismiss this as “Sefardic hocus pocus”, as did one Jewish
American film critic3. Rather, it seems essential to recognize that superstitious traditions like these are part of a rich cultural heritage that Jews from North Africa have brought with them to their new homelands, and as such, they have an intrinsic value in and of themselves as symbols reinforcing belonging, memory and identity all firmly attached to a shared North African history and experience.

Faith and the repeating rhythms of Jewish rituals have a central place in the film, be it the daily ritual of morning prayers and *tefillin*, weekly celebration around the Shabbat table, or in Mathilde’s monthly visits to the mikvah. The film opens with the community sharing in the Rosh Hashana ritual of *tashlich*, the tossing of bread into a river symbolically casting off sins before the High holidays, and also includes lively scenes from Purim and Simchat Torah. Explaining her motivations for choosing these particular lesser known holidays Albou says: “I wanted to show a new theme with Jews. They always show in Jewish films a Yom Kippur or a Shabbat. I wanted to show other holidays to show the joy of those days. I wanted to show things positively with a Shabbat meal where people are laughing and singing.”4

Mathilde’s monthly visit to the *mikvah* is especially moving, since it is in this strictly feminine space where deep emotions have room to flow encouraged by allegorical powers of the living waters, or *mayim chaim*, contained in the bath. This is a place where one is faced with the bare essence of life, as a woman undresses and immerses in the waters, the symbolism of physical and spiritual re-birth, purification and a becoming one with the source representing the origins of life. Here in the *mikvah*, her husband’s unfaithfulness overwhelms her, but the *mikvah* attendant’s attentive and sensitive way of guiding and comforting Mathilde helps her see hope. Parenthetically, the word *mikvah* is from the same Hebrew root as the word for “hope” (kof, vav, vav, hay), a word we also recognize in the title of Israel’s national anthem *Ha-Tikvah*. In a tender sisterly scene, skeptical and rebellious Laura tells Mathilde she is accompanying and supporting her timid older sister as she will seek marital advice with the *mikvah* attendant. In addition to overseeing that preparations and immersions take place according to the Torah and its traditions, she also functions as an educator and guide to brides and married women in what can be sensitive but necessary discussions on sexuality and what is considered kosher ways to enjoy

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3 As expressed by Jordan Hiller in a film review and interview with Albou posted on the Jewish web site www.bangitout.com on 07-25-2006.
sex. From this meeting Mathilde realizes that she can and should let herself enjoy all the physical sensations and pleasures when with her husband, as well as share in sexual activities she thought not to be permissible. Albou has mentioned that she portrayed Mathilde in this way, as being convinced that nothing was allowed, because it was convenient for this young, religious mother of four to think that way, perhaps a way for the director to show her questioning of ignorance as particularly problematic for women when combined with religious observance. \(^5\) Thanks to the enlightening talks shared at the mikvah, Mathilde and Ariel can again be joined in mutually rewarding and giving intimacy.

Scenes depicting the challenges of the French Jewish community over the past decade are realistically portrayed in *La Pétite Jérusalem* as when their synagogue is torched by neighborhood hoodlums, and when Ariel and his tzitzit and kippah-clad soccer buddies are ambushed and beaten up in broad daylight by a gang of masked men, presumed to be Arab. In his recent film entitled *Comme un Juif en France*, (2008) or in English “Being Jewish in France”, documentary film maker Yves Jeuland uses this emblematic scene as the opening to discuss the escalating anti-Semitism seen in France over the last ten years. We may recall that following the drastic resurgence in public violence against Jews in Europe, then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon made a controversial appeal to French Jewry: Move en masse to Israel, you will be safer here. *La Pétite Jérusalem* ends with Ariel, the head of the household, announcing his decision that the family will uproot again, but this time from France, to make aliyah and immigrate to Israel, as Mathilde and the children celebrate this hopeful new beginning for the recently reconciled couple. The mother, an exiled North African Jewish woman about to be re-exiled and uprooted once again, a woman with no name and no place of her own, quietly acquiesces to her fate, while in a symbolic act she seems to indicate her appreciation for her younger daughter Laura’s independent decision to stay behind in Paris. She gives Laura her only piece of jewelry, a family heirloom and a memory from her life in Tunisia, so that her daughter can use it toward her rent as she establishes a new life for herself.

*Le Chant des Mariées* is set in Tunis in 1942 as the film narrates the little known history of the German invasion of Tunisia and specifically the effect that had on the Jewish-Muslim

populations and relations, from the perspectives of two teenage girls and best friends, one Jew and the other an Arab. While both girls are about to be married, Nour welcomes her longed for nuptials to Khaled, whereas Myriam dreads her own arranged union with Raoul, a much older man and doctor from a wealthy family, whose money is needed to pay the reparation payment imposed on Tunisian Jews by the Nazis. Myriam’s mother, played by Karin Albou herself, is a struggling widow whose meager earning as a seamstress puts them in a difficult situation. It is primarily the complexity of the intimate friendship between the two girls which is explored throughout the film as their closeness is undermined by the harsh political climate of the times. Albou does not shy away from incorporating brief documentary film or radio clips revealing both local Tunisian and Islamic leadership’s co-operation with German war practices and propaganda, thus reminding the audience that the looming dangers of Nazi goals with regards to Jews had a much wider reach than typically recognized in the popular memory of WWII.

Special attention is given to reveal the often close meshing of Jewish and Arab cultures in (colonial) Tunisia, a reality often erased or ignored today from the official discourse of Jewish-Arab histories. The girls live in the same riad – a traditional North African multi family home – Nour and her family in the apartment on the ground floor that opens up to the common courtyard, and Myriam and her mother in the smaller apartment upstairs. The riad is symbolic in that it underscored the shared life of the people who lived there, and many of Nour and Myriam’s encounters, as well as that of their families’ take place in the protected confines of the riad courtyard. Here is a water well, as well as doorways that open and close, invite and exclude as the closeness of the girls’ bond vacillates throughout the film. It is worth noting that since Myriam and her mother are rather poor, they live in the Arab quarter, as understood by the girls peering out through the narrow, barred windows down on the alleyways where Muslim boys and men walk to and from the mosque. Distinct as well in the design of the riad was the adherence to the Islamic notions of privacy for women inside residential gardens, and while Jewish homes built in the hara – the Jewish ghetto – typically had windows and balconies facing the street, the Arab homes were turned inward around the confines of the courtyard ensuring a distinct separation between the world of women, the domestic sphere, and that of men on the streets and in the public sphere. It is possible Myriam and her mother rented from Arabs as this was the most affordable option.
In this film, Albou takes her audience into female spaces in the casual nakedness of the hammam and the ribald humor of Nour’s engagement party. In one of the opening scenes, we see Arab and Jewish women celebrating together where Nour is at the center of attention, surrounded by women friends and family, many dressed in undergarments as their generous fleshiness mingle around the bride to be, while they tease, dance, tell stories, ululate and sing. Myriam and her mother Tita belong here, and participate naturally and comfortably in the bawdy humor filled with sexual innuendos and intimate female bonding.

There are two distinct scenes from the hammam, where chatter, giggles and gossiping is heard as the women bathe each other or move about. But this is also a place where Tita and Myriam hear anti-Semitic slurs from the attendant about the difficulty of getting money from Jews, as Myriam’s mother is behind on her hammam fees. Another scene from the hammam takes place later in the film, when Nour and Myriam’s friendship is strained and they are not talking. When a group of German soldiers barge in to single out Jewish women for roundups, in the ensuing chaos of fleeing bodies trying to cover themselves up, the soldiers assume that those not yet covered up are Jews, and Myriam is taken aside. Nour instinctively throws her a cloth, pulls her close to protect her, and exclaims “It’s my sister, she’s a Muslim!” Asked to prove it, Nour begins to recite a prayer that Myriam repeats, and this satisfies the soldier, ignorant as he is about the fact that Jews speak Arabic also. With the hammam scenes, Albou underscores the universal relationship to water as well as the cultural centrality of the shared social ritual of public bathing with the use of the hammam in Islamic culture. Incidentally, today in France, there are mikvahs that also advertise being “salle de réception pour henné et hammam” – reception room for henna ceremonies and hammam, telling us that the large Sephardi community has brought with them many traditions adopted from centuries of existence in Islamic countries.

Khaled, who needs to find a job before Nour’s father will allow them to get married, is hired by the Germans and consequently influenced by anti-Jewish propaganda. As he is eager to remind Nour of the Jews’ preferential treatment under the French colonists, and how the Germans are promising the Tunisians freedom after the war is won. He also tries to convince her that her friendship with a Jew can jeopardize her life, and looks to dictate his future bride’s

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relations with her best friend. As the Nazis tighten their hold on Tunis, the rift between Nour and Myriam grows wider until, finally, the lines of communications are cut entirely. But some bonds seem made to last, and despite the outside forces creating obstacles for the girl’s intimacy as friends as well as mature understanding of the others’ complex predicament, through Nour’s newly acquired reading skills in Arabic (which Myriam, who receives a formal education, has taught her), she discovers passages in the Qur’an stating the mandated tolerance of Jews and Christians. Finally, Nour finds Myriam in a bomb shelter during an air raid. The last scene of the film suggests their irrevocable bond as they embrace, in fear and gratitude, each reciting their own religion’s traditional prayer, the Shema and the Al-Ikhlas, both proclaiming the oneness of God. Just as the little girls were singing the wedding song in Arabic in the opening scene of the film, dreaming and imagining together the preparations of a bride as their innocent voices come together, so at the film’s ending their voices blend, one in Arabic and one in Hebrew, chanting and sharing the dream of hope for survival in the face of danger. Surah 112 begins with the word “iqra”, meaning “say”...and then follows the declaration of God’s divinity and oneness, while the Shema opens with the word “hear, or listen” as the first verse encapsulates the monotheistic essence of Judaism. The young women say and we hear. Despite their differences, it is what they share which brings them and their hopes together, or as coined by Sephardi French Moroccan psychoanalyst Daniel Sibony: it is in this “entre-deux” – this “in-between” -- where “l’origine en partage” – “the shared origin” -- can and will make our acceptance of the Other possible. The films’ director Karin Albou is a graduate from the prestigious Ecole Supérieure de Réalisation Audiovisuelle in France, and La Pétite Jérusalem and Le Chant des Mariées are

La Pétite Jérusalem and Le Chant des Mariées represent two significant contributions to the Sephardi “resurgence” seen over the past decade within Jewish culture as it evolves in the Diaspora. They exemplify how a new generation of Jewish filmmakers place the notion of Jewish diversity in identity and memory is based within a non-European, non-Ashkenazi framework. The films’ director Karin Albou is a graduate from the prestigious Ecole Supérieure de Réalisation Audiovisuelle in France, and La Pétite Jérusalem and Le Chant des Mariées are

7 Sibony, L’Entre-Deux. L’Origine en Partage. Paris: Seuil, 1991. In this work Sibony elaborates his concept of “in-between” as a place to encounter the “other”, using the example of Arabs and Jews who need to venture out of their subjectivity in order to become open to receiving the full notion of the other as part of themselves. His argument is that by acknowledging the shared origin – “l’origine en partage” – parties or individuals in conflict will be able to see the necessity of accepting the other in order to be able to exist fully as oneself. He points out that while venturing out of one’s comfort zone to this space of “in-between” can be disconcerting it is also a highly fertile place where conflict resolution is possible.
the director’s first two commercial feature films. With their realization, she has successfully moved these important themes beyond Jewish and art house film festivals to a larger audience. Both have received much critical acclaim in France and internationally as well as won several international awards, including the Cannes Film Festival Screenwriting Award in 2005 and several Césars. Albou was born in 1959 to a Jewish father, and she later converted officially to Judaism when she married a Tunisian French Jew in France, disclosing in an interview that she has herself lived the life of an observant Jewish woman, and thus is able to closely identify with her characters.\textsuperscript{8} Similar to authors who write texts of fiction, the creator of a film will have her own motivations for including autobiographical elements, since as we know, even fiction is never purely fictitious. It was Albert Memmi who said that “All literature is in a sense autobiographic. It is an attempt at expressing personal anguish.”\textsuperscript{9} Albou has expressed that the various emotions such as alienation, doubt, powerlessness and pain lived by the women in her films represent experiences which have a universal appeal, as she does not see them or look to portray them as specific to a Sephardi experience. Be they sisters, mothers or best friends, both films’ main characters are women who through realities of their intimate and communal lives as set in contemporary France or colonial Tunisia, face decisions of how to navigate and express their lives often perceived as clouded by a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. In a recent correspondence Albou told me that concerning Sephardic identity, she is not trying to convey a particular massage, rather for her it is a cultural framework where her characters evolve and live universal conflicts and feelings. She chose this cultural frame, first because she knows it, and because she says she has a need to question it in many ways.

In writing the scripts for these two films Karin Albou’s finds ways to express known or unknown parts of her own personal journey, as she is herself a Sephardi woman from North Africa navigating her and her family’s experiences both as remembered in North Africa as a Jewish minority among a Muslim majority, and in France as immigrants. But the Jews from North Africa have not typically been identified in French immigration politics as facing many of the similar issues as their Arab counterparts, the Sephardi Jews are assumed to be more easily assimilated because of their French acculturation under colonial times in the Maghreb. Unlike

\textsuperscript{8} In email correspondence with author, fall of 2010.

\textsuperscript{9} Postcolonialisme \& Autobiographie. Alfred Honung, and Ernstpeter Ruhe, eds. Amsterdam /Atlanta: Rodopi B.V., 1998., 69.
blacks and Arabs, Jews are not readily represented as immigrants. The fact that the two films discussed here are written from the standpoint of a Sephardi woman illuminates aspects of a social totality previously suppressed with the dominant view. As a minority woman, in our case Jewish, this elucidation is capable of transforming hitherto narrow or ignorant views of what it means to be non-Muslim, non-Arab, non-pied-noir, and yet deeply rooted in the Maghreb and its cultural, historical and political past. One might say that through her work creating films that speak about Sephardi women’s experiences Albou is artistically constructing Sephardi identities and making a gendered invisible minority become visible in the important historical and political contexts of colonial and post-colonial experiences. Writer and historian Hélène Trigano points out in the book *Mémoire sépharade* that “By claiming the right to speak, the Sephardim access a representation of what happened to them, of what they were, of what they have become, and in that, finding support to give a sense to their existence.”

The mushrooming of publications and productions relevant to Sephardi culture and history, in all its different genres will surely bring us many more creative and important films where Sephardi identities play a central role in the stories told. These identities are not only constructed for the big screen, but re-constructed, and re-counted to become part of a larger framework of what is considered when we speak of Jewish history, Jewish culture, and Jewish identities. Neither static nor frozen in time, these are identities evolving over time, and no longer being told passively by others, but fashioned by creative Sephardi Jews, like writer and director Karin Albou, who is telling us: “*shema*-listen! to what I say!-*iqra*!, we are one, also in our diversity.” The shadowy figures on the margins that Elgrably and many of his contemporaries were taught to be but relics of a colorful history and irrelevant today, are neither shadowy nor irrelevant. Rather, in the reality of the shared culture of Arabs and Jews, which has defined the lives of Jews from Islamic countries for generations, the role of this Sephardic narrative and identity as reflected in film such as these are made all the more relevant.

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