Return to Casablanca: Jews, Muslims, and an Israeli Anthropologist by André Levy


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In this work, André Levy, the titular Israeli anthropologist, returns to his birthplace to study the few thousand Jews who chose not to emigrate after Morocco gained independence in 1956. Levy seeks to understand nostalgia among Jews who left and among Jews who stayed: the latter seek home in a Morocco that was; Levy and fellow émigrés seek a home in a Morocco that may yet be. The resulting ethnography tells us much about the Morocco that is.

Although Levy’s book is set in the early 1990s, Return to Casablanca feels timely. His project was impractical, even unthinkable, until Morocco’s then-ruler Hassan II appeared on Israeli television to welcome all Moroccan Jews—“his children” (p. 188)—to return. The royal gesture touched and inspired Moroccan Israeli listeners and also reinforced Morocco’s geopolitical position as Arab–Israeli and Western–Muslim mediator. This strategic rhetoric of religious “tolerance” remains in force today, as the Moroccan state proclaims its historical “openness to the other.” Levy’s book details more complicated political and personal dynamics of Jewish–Muslim and Morocco–Israeli intimacy and contempt. Indeed, readers will find here no simple confirmation of Morocco’s inclusivity. Yet Levy interprets Moroccan Jewish–Muslim connections with such honesty, humor, and nuance that one finds encouragement in the ethnographic encounter itself.

Levy began fieldwork during the 1991 Gulf War, feeling “vulnerable and exposed” (p. 23) and hiding his Israeli citizenship (he surrendered his passport to Moroccan officials in exchange for a “transit visa”). But Levy openly identified as Jewish and put his anxiety to ethnographic use. His “feelings of threat . . . border[ing] on self-centered paranoia” in fact matched local Jews’ “ego-centric perception that they were relevant, even central to public life in Morocco” (p. 19). That apparently contradictory perception defines what Levy calls Moroccan Jewish community’s “contraction,” a key concept describing his subjects’ “introvert inclination” in a Muslim-majority land (p. 19). Contraction is specifically postcolonial. If Jews in the past, 300 thousand strong, had “dare[d] not lift their heads” (p. 65), they nonetheless belonged to a broader religious and cultural weave. Under French rule, some Jewish merchants and intellectuals identified closely with European modernity and experienced relative liberation from these local strictures. Levy notes his discomfort with positing “European colonialism as a liberating and civilizing force” (p. 60), but he acknowledges Moroccan Jew’s nostalgia for French occupation and, more pointedly, their dispiriting sense of renewed submission in the postcolonial era of mass emigration. Now, Moroccan Jews who remained “have become foreigners in their own country” (p. 153). They too seek to return “home” to Casablanca.

Three subsequent ethnographic chapters illustrate contraction as both an inter- and intracommunal dynamic of spatial control. Social clubs provide spaces of Jewish control, wherein Muslims may be present but ignorable, and “Community Committee” serves Jews so they need not serve themselves (and thus make contact with Muslims). A fascinating chapter examines the apparently exceptional case of intercommunal friendship in public card games (“Rummy Couples”) that pair a Muslim and Jew per team. But Levy discerns in mixed teams and “play” a calculated suppression of fear: pairing a Muslim and a Jew on a team and adhering to the “strict and universal” (and, crucially, French) game rules provides Jews “security net” of a “higher authority” (p. 141). Levy notes, however, that tolerance does not mean equality. Muslims and Jews accuse Jews of cheating, but “in the hundreds of games that I watched,” Levy writes, “never did a situation occur, not even once, where a Jew publicly accused a Muslim of cheating” (p. 138).

Two final chapters focus on Jewish intracommunal and international tensions regarding Moroccans’ refusal to accept Israel as Judaism’s singular center. If Jewish émigrés feel and heed the call of Moroccan origins so strongly, can Israel claim to be the Jews’ homeland? Are homeland and diaspora not reversed? Here Levy’s thoughtful examination of intracommunal disunity points again to postcolonial history. For Levy, what bars Israeli Jews from ever fully returning to Casablanca and “reuniting the family” (p. 193)—what supersedes religious community—is the implacable fact of nation-states. Yet, he makes clear, these same boundaries produce the very desire they inhibit.

Levy’s fearless prose is often a pleasure to read and, indeed, would make good reading for introductory and advanced students of North African studies, multiethnic Israel, Jewish studies, and migration. Nevertheless, he might have drawn more general conclusions regarding religious pluralism from his excellent ethnographic observations. Most ripe for further interpretation is his repeated invocation of
Moroccan Jews', including émigrés', "unconditional loyalty" to Morocco's powerful royal family (p. 189). This is not simply a question of national-state loyalty but of power as a guarantor of pluralist "tolerance." One thinks of the French rules guiding "Rummy Couples" as well as Jews' nostalgia for the relative security of colonial protection. Tolerance requires coexistence, but it is antidemocratic, being conditioned by submission to an absolute, and absolutely foreign, sovereign.