

Jewish pilgrims converge on town in Morocco

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(Audio Article)

It's an uncommon sight for an Arab country: hundreds of joyous Jewish pilgrims gathering without fear around a rabbi's tomb, greeted by local Muslim officials who share a prayer with them at a synagogue.

Yet most of the 400 Jews who converged on the Moroccan coastal town of Safi — some from nearby cities, others from as far as France or Israel — at a weekend pilgrimage said they felt welcome here.

While religious tensions flare in Jerusalem and beyond, in Morocco, Jews and Muslims say they nurture a legacy of tolerance and maintain common sanctuaries where adherents of both religions pray. Decades of emigration to Israel by Morocco's Jews and terrorist bombings in Casablanca that targeted Jewish sites haven't diminished the draw of these annual pilgrimages.

During the festival that began Friday, visitors prayed and feasted around the shrine of Abraham Ben Zmirro, a rabbi reputed to have fled persecution in Spain in the 15th century and then lived in Safi, where he is buried with six siblings.

A half-Jewish, half-Muslim band played local tunes during a banquet, including a song in French, Arabic and Hebrew with the line: "There is only one God, you worship Him sitting down and I while standing up."

The pilgrims were joined Sunday by Aaron Monsenego, the great rabbi of Morocco, who prayed alongside the regional governor and several other Muslim officials at the shrine's synagogue for the good health of Morocco's King Mohammed VI and his family.

"It's very important for us to pray altogether," Monsenego told The Associated Press.

Regional governor Larbi Hassan Sebbari said, "We're also very proud of it: it gives a lesson to other countries of what we do together without any taboo."

While several Arab states refuse to recognize the Jewish state's right to exist, reject Israeli visitors and ignore the remnants of their local Jewish heritage, Moroccans insist it is not the case in this moderate Muslim nation and U.S. ally.

Once home to some 300,000 Jews, Morocco hosts the Arab world's only Jewish museum, funds Jewish institutions and frequently holds events to celebrate Judeo-Moroccan heritage.

Still, the Jewish population here has dwindled to about 4,000 — most in Casablanca. Economics, fears of living in an Arab state and sporadic discrimination drove hundreds of thousands of Moroccan Jews to Israel, Europe or America over the past few decades.

Many left in 1948 when the state of Israel was created, or in 1956 when Morocco won independence from France. Other waves followed after the Israeli-Arab conflicts of 1967 and 1973 caused riots in some Moroccan towns.

Jewish leaders who stayed say they practice their religion freely and that synagogues are well protected by police, especially since the 2003 bombings in Casablanca. And despite the bombings, Casablanca — Morocco's commercial capital — still boasts 32 active synagogues.

"There was never any racism in Safi," said Haim Ohana, one of only 10 Jewish people remaining in a town where 6,000 Jews once lived. "People left from here because they were poor," said Ohana, who helped organize the pilgrimage and runs several businesses.

The pilgrimage rituals are called Mousseem in Arabic and Hilloula in Hebrew.

Many of the pilgrims, including ultra-Orthodox Jews from Israel and French and Canadian businessmen, are emigres who say they come to pray in Safi because of their emotional ties to Morocco.

Therese Elisha, an Israeli, said she makes the pilgrimage every other year. "This is the town where I grew up, the synagogue where I prayed," she said. "I feel at home."

"We're maintaining a bridge over the divide of the exodus," said Simone Merra, a human resources manager in Paris.

Some of Morocco's Jews wonder how long their community will remain. Nadia Bensimon, who runs a fashion boutique in a coastal town, said she had no plans to leave. "But that could change if the Islamists become too powerful," she said.

Morocco's main Islamist opposition party — Adl wal Ihsan — enjoys broad support, but it is banned from politics; secular parties dominate parliament.

Though most of his relatives now live abroad, Ohana said his family traces its arrival in Morocco to 2,076 years ago.

"As for Safi, we've been here for nine centuries," he said. "It's my town, I'd see no reason to leave."

AP