

Living Side by Side: Morocco's Jews and Muslims. BBC, Jan 2026

Heart and Soul is the second of a two-part series looking at Jewish-Muslim relations in different parts of the world. Saturday morning prayers at one of Casablanca's ornate synagogues. The congregation is largely of older men, a reflection of the city's aging but tightly knit Jewish community.

A short distance away on the Casablanca shoreline, the majestic Hassan II Mosque with its 200-meter high minaret, one of the largest mosques in the world. Two ancient faiths living side by side. I'm Mike Lanshin and for this edition of Heart and Soul from the documentary, I'm in Morocco to hear the experiences of some of those who've embraced this coexistence.

I can and I do wear my kippah. I go out normally. People, they look at me.

Some, they're happy. They say Shabbat shalom or shalom. Whenever there was a war, you would hear the question, are you with us or with them? Are you with your Jewish side or your Islamic side or Muslim side? Do you feel more Muslim or do you feel more Jewish? I want to explore how this North African country has come to be seen as a place where Jews and Muslims live peacefully alongside each other.

We have this devoir, this duty. We have a responsibility to preserve this Jewish memory because it is part of us as Moroccan, not as Jews or as Muslim. This is living side by side, Morocco's Jews and Muslims for the BBC World Service.

I'm here in Rabat, the bustling capital of Morocco situated on the Atlantic coast. It's noted for its Islamic and French colonial heritage and was once a haven for mainly Muslim Barbary pirates. I've come here to meet a young man whose story gives us a window into both the Jewish and the Muslim communities.

Hello. Hi Issam, how are you? I'm good and you? Yeah, pleased to meet you. Nice to meet you too.

Thank you. Welcome. Wow, a lovely house you have.

Hi dogs. Issam has short cropped hair. He's clean shaven and wearing a smart flowery shirt.

We meet at his mother's house in a quiet residential neighbourhood. It's full of splendid wall hangings and colourful tiled floors. So my name is Issam.

I'm 33 years old. I live in Rabat. My mum is a Moroccan Jew.

My father is a Moroccan Muslim. When you were a little boy, when you were growing up with your mum and dad, how were you raised in terms of your faith? So my father used to talk to me about Islam and he's Muslim of course. He prays a lot.

He's a lot into Islam and Quran and everything. Would you join him in that? I used to go to... I used to pray. I used to do Ramadan.

I used to fast. I used to read Quran and everything. I was doing my Muslim things and we celebrated.

We go to see grandma, go to see family. We share meals and everything. So we used to do the Muslim culture.

Peacefully, normally and everything. Was there a particular moment when you felt that wasn't right for you or was it a gradual process? Let's say when I used to be like 10, 12 years old. I used to love Jewish music and Jewish DJs and things like that.

And I used to see the Hebrew language on the screen, on the videos and everything. And I was so interested. I felt like there's something between me and that language and everything.

But I couldn't understand what was it. I respect Islam. I have nothing against Islam or any other religion.

But whenever I read Quran, I see that it's not for me. So I felt that I am Jewish. I need to discover the Jewish culture.

That's you standing in the synagogue here in Rabat. This is here in Rabat, in the synagogue, as you can see. I was with my mom.

She's there. There she is. We touched the Torah.

Yeah, I have a picture of me. Esam began going to synagogue near the family home in Rabat, wearing a kippah, keeping the Sabbath, and gradually moving beyond his family circle to meet other Moroccan Jews. It's been a process, he says, exploring his Jewish roots.

But it's one that has at times brought him into conflict with his father's Muslim family. They never said anything bad at the beginning or anything, which is a good thing. But we never brought this subject and talked about it.

They knew that I was interested in the Jewish culture. I wear my kippah. They saw me and they know that I support Israel.

They should accept it because this is my personal choice. No one is gonna tell me which religion I will practice. Esam's own journey is, in a way, a reflection of his country's history of multiple languages, cultures, and different faiths living side by side.

Morocco's Jews first arrived around the time of the Roman Empire. The Jewish Moroccan community goes back to the first millennia. I mean, the first community came to Morocco in 1780 after the destruction of the second temple.

And another community actually came from Spain and Portugal in 1492. So we have two different communities. This is Abdou El Kakaoubi.

He's part of a Moroccan group called Mimouna that promotes and preserves the country's Jewish heritage. It takes its name from the traditional North African Jewish celebration held at the end of Passover. Back in the days when there was a big Jewish community in Morocco for Passover, Jews would not eat hametz, would not eat bread.

So they would take all their bread and give it to the Muslims, the neighbors. And after the holiday, then the Muslims would bring the bread back and bring not only breakfast, also vegetables, milk, honey, butter. All the things that are forbidden for Jews during Passover.

And the Jews would open their doors for the Muslims and celebrate the last day of Passover together. Looking back at contemporary history, that togetherness between Jews and Muslims here has certainly had its testing moments. During the Second World War, Morocco was a French protectorate governed by the Nazi-supporting Vichy authorities.

Sultan Mohammed V, who was more a ceremonial figure, tried to resist the Nazis' anti-Jewish laws and reportedly once said, there are no Jews in Morocco, only Moroccan subjects. But it was in the years after the defeat of the Nazis that the exodus of Jews began, accelerated by the establishment of the State of Israel and its wars with other Arab nations. Whenever there was a war in the Middle East, it affects the relationship between Jews and Muslims here.

And this made a lot of Jews leave Morocco. And, of course, we can't deny the fact that also we had some problems in Morocco. I mean, back in the 1950s, there was like a process of Arabization and a lot of Jews left Morocco because they spoke French since the 19th century.

So the Fils obliged to leave because it was hard for them to live here. How was that exodus viewed by the Muslim population? Of course, a lot of Muslims, especially the ones who lived with Jews, I mean, they were partners, but they were neighbours. They were sometimes even family members.

Sometimes they felt that they were abandoned because they did not let their Muslim friends or Muslim neighbours know that they are leaving. So they felt abandoned and they felt sometimes even betrayed that they did not receive a goodbye. From around 300,000 in the 1940s, Morocco's Jewish population has fallen to around 2,000 to 3,000 today.

There are almost a million Moroccan Jews or Jews of Moroccan descent now living in Israel. Sabbath prayers at Casablanca's Beth El Temple synagogue, a beautifully decorated building with wooden panels and colourful stained glass windows. Apart from the older men leading the service, there are a few women in the upstairs area and one or two younger boys.

Stepping out now out of the synagogue onto the busy streets of the old quarter with its winding back streets and markets and little coffee shops, you still find a few kosher butchers and bakeries and the odd relic from the past like the restored 19th century synagogue that's

almost hidden from view down a tiny alleyway. Though the Jewish population here is now very small, there is a concerted effort to maintain the cultural and religious links that bind it into Morocco's history. So this is sort of the main area which is quite echoey in here, isn't it? It's, and what are we looking at here? Here you have the jileba for rabbi.

This is Moroccan costume for rabbi, black one like jileba. At the Jewish Museum in Casablanca, the curator Zahor Rahihil proudly shows me what's on display. Wooden prayer beads that could be at home in a synagogue or a mosque and thick golden thread embroidered kaftan wedding dresses.

This is really like special kaftan for Jewish bride in Morocco. It is green, you see, because before we have only three colors for bride in Morocco, Jewish as Muslim. The museum, which describes itself as one of the only Jewish museums in the Arab world, is situated in a pleasant residential neighborhood on the site of a former orphanage.

It opened in 1997 with the support of the Moroccan government. We have this devoir, this duty. We have a responsibility to preserve this Jewish memory because it is part of us as Moroccan, not as Jews or as Muslim.

Zahor is not only a Muslim in charge of a Jewish museum, but she was also the first Muslim woman to study Judaism at Rabat University. I'm keen to know where her interest comes from. I'm not the only, the first person who asked me this question.

Why? I feel that like all this generation, Arab generation, I was very touched and marked by this conflict, Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So this is a factor will give me like motivation to try to understand something about Jewish question and Jewish heritage in Morocco. It is like a way to try to understand this conflict.

The human is curious. I was, every time I was and I'm curious, I still curious, you see. And do you have a synagogue in this? Could we see that? Zahor is clearly enthusiastic about her mission at the museum.

And she says she's convinced that teaching Moroccans, Jews and Muslims alike about their shared heritage is key to overcoming both present and future conflict. I'm sure that we are a model and an example, but other thing you shouldn't forget something that during centuries, during centuries and centuries, the big community of Jews, they were living in this urban Muslim country, in Syria, of Iraq, of Iran, of Yemen, of Egypt, of Libya, of Tunisia, Jews of Baghdad, Jews of Aleppo, Jews of Fez and Kairouan. It's amazing.

It's amazing. That means this Arab area of Muslim, we have this tradition of living together, Jews, Muslim and Christian. Today, not.

That means you have a lot of judgment. You are saying what's happening in the world. There is not this opening of spirit.

There is not this tolerance and to respect the others. Does that make your work here in the museum more difficult now? We feel that we have a mission and we have work to do with it. This is the time to do it.

You're listening to Heart & Soul from the documentary for the BBC World Service. I'm Mike Blanchin, and this is Living Side by Side, Morocco's Jews and Muslims. My name is Maxim Karouchi.

I'm a singer from Moroccan and Jewish Moroccan music. You're the last representative of the Jewish singers here in Morocco, do you think? Yeah, the last one. Maxim is well known in both Morocco and Israel.

We meet at his apartment with its large mirrors on the wall and a small piano in the corner where he's been practicing for a wedding at the weekend. I'm the sixth generation. My father was a singer.

My grandfather was a singer. My great-grandfather was also a singer. Music comes from both sides of the family.

When you were growing up, what was it like being a Jew growing up in this country? How was that? First of all, it's my country. It's my roots. It's my culture.

I'm not a foreigner here, a Frenchman or an Italian who came to live in Morocco. So in music as well as in painting, I sing and represent my country, which is Morocco. So we sing to Moroccans in Moroccan Arabic.

I'm always being asked this kind of question as if I have to identify myself. Let me give you an example. If you take the tree that produces argan oil, the argan tree, and you take it somewhere else, it will never produce argan oil because its roots are in Morocco.

So my roots are here. Do you remember the first time that you sang at a Muslim wedding when you were, how old were you? 21. I was with my father.

I started playing the piano, singing two or three songs. But it was my father who sang that evening. It was my first time on stage.

So it wasn't because it was a Muslim wedding or a Jewish wedding. No. For me, it was being on stage.

That's what was so magical. And you grew up in a very Jewish culture as well, as well as a singing culture. It's a Moroccan culture.

We sing Moroccan songs, though we have our own style. There are songs that belong to Jews that are also sung at Moroccan weddings by Muslim orchestras. That's natural here.

It's the foreigners who see it differently. They come and say, how can a Jew be singing in Arabic

at a Muslim wedding? Music is the first universal language. It's the language that all people from any country can understand.

My dream is that all heads of states could play an instrument and form a great orchestra to play the music of the Dvorak's New World. Everyone will play the same music with the same message. of a new world in peace because peace will only come when we put religion aside and separate it from everyday life.

Because religion is something personal. Issam, who we met earlier, has invited me to stay for lunch with him and his mother and some Muslim friends who've dropped by. There's a lovely large dish of couscous with meat and vegetables in the center of the table.

A typical Moroccan meal. Food and music, as Maxime the singer says, can and often do bring people together. Something that religion sometimes can't, as Issam and his family have found out.

My father's family, so I don't see them anymore because I'm not interested in them anymore, to be honest. What about your relationship with your father? How do you... I understand your parents don't live together anymore. Yeah, they're divorced.

So he doesn't like the fact that I chose to be Jew. It must hurt you a little bit to feel that your own flesh and blood, your father and his family can't accept you in that way. Because they grew up like that, so I cannot do anything about it.

So... But you can't talk to him about it? No, because I don't see him anymore. So I prefer to be in peace until he decides to talk about it. Are your brothers also practicing Judaism or are they following your father's religion? The little brother practiced Judaism more than Islam.

The big one, we did Shabbat many times together. He was happy. He wore the kippah and everything.

But sometimes he follows Islam. Sometimes he's just like that. He's living life without any religion or anything.

What do you feel about that? Let them take their time. And no matter what, they should know that they have Jewish origins. Because they're my brothers.

If I have it, they have it. No matter what. Apart from with your father and his family, have you had any instances where people here in Morocco harassed you or questioned you about why you've adopted Judaism? Let's say I've never had a lot of bad experiences.

Only twice or three times in my life. You cannot manifest your Jewishness openly here, do you think? I can and I do wear my kippah. I go out.

I do my things normally. People, they look at me. Some, they're happy.

They say Shabbat Shalom or Shalom or anything like that. Or they talk to me. Some of them, they just look at me and that's it.

They don't attack me. So I am safe. What about with your social groups? Are most of your friends Muslim or Jewish? What about that? Actually, most of my friends, they are all from different religions.

And I love them. I respect them. They respect me.

We don't talk about politics. We don't talk about what's happening now between Israel. I avoid this subject because it's not something that makes me comfortable to talk about.

And as far as the future in this country, the Jewish community is smaller and getting smaller and depends upon people like you to continue it. Do you see your future as here? Ultimately, would you see your future abroad? Let's say, yes, there is future in here. Because a lot of people, they started to know that this Jewish culture that you're having a bad idea about, it's not like that.

So that makes me feel happy and comfy and there's hope. In central Rabat, having left Issam, I went past a small but noisy demonstration in support of the Palestinian armed resistance to Israel. A reminder of how events in the Middle East echo loudly here.

Issam told me that he chooses not to talk about politics with his friends and much less so with his family. But surely it must influence relations between Jews and Muslims here. Abdu, who we heard from earlier, and who works to promote interfaith understanding, is also from a mixed marriage.

His father's side is Muslim, his mother's Jewish, which he says allows him to straddle the two communities. Especially back in the days, I mean, a lot of people were talking about these different marriages between Muslim men and Jewish women. They were very much accepted.

But today, I mean, a lot of the children coming from these interfaith marriages, sometimes they would hide their Jewish side. They would feel that they don't have enough argument to defend their Jewish identity, for instance. So they would stick with the Islamic or Muslim identity more so not to be put in an angle where they have to speak about their Jewish side.

Were you personally put in that situation? Whenever there was a war, you would hear the question, are you with us or with them? Are you with your Jewish side or your Islamic side or Muslim side? Do you feel more Muslim or do you feel more Jewish? Or do you want to continue your life with a Jewish partner or a Muslim partner? In my case, you are Muslim for Muslims and you are Jewish for Jews because in Judaism, you are what your mother is. So I'm both, actually, you know. And for a lot of people, you cannot be both.

You have to pick one side. So it's like you have to choose it. You know, as Moroccans, we can be a lot of things.

Once you get a Moroccan, you scratch the first layer, you're going to find an Arab. And then you scratch again, you're going to find a Jew. That's the Moroccan.

We have different layers. We can be a lot of things in one person. In many senses, Morocco is a model, is an example.

Do you see that example, that model as being an enduring one, one that's going to last? Yeah. Well, hopefully, I mean, nothing is granted. I mean, if we can learn from some experiences in the region, I mean, if you go to Iran, for instance, in the 1970s, it was a haven for all the minorities in the region.

For Lebanon, I mean, Lebanon was a place for every single community. In Egypt, also, it's our richness. If we lose it, we're going to lose an identity.

We're going to lose a component of the Moroccan culture. And the Moroccanity, as we call it, would not seem the same. In the shadow of the giant Hassan II Mosque, dominating Casablanca shoreline, kids are playing soccer.

Families are out strolling in the cool evening air. People here talk about the neighborly coexistence between the faiths. And Morocco's constitution recognizes a Hebraic, that is a Jewish component of the national identity.

But I wonder what will keep that harmony intact as conflict spreads elsewhere. Maxime, the Jewish musician, trusts the unifying power of music. Sir Hoare, from the Jewish Museum, puts her faith in education, talking to the next generation of Moroccans.

In the museum, we receive a lot of Muslim, yeah, kids from schools, Moroccan public school, Moroccan private school. And for this, every time in the end of the visits, they give this, like, conclusion. Every time they say, well, we discover that Jews are like us.

And they said, yes. That must make you smile. You're smiling now.

Yeah, this is finally, this is our goal. Yeah, I'm so happy. Are you optimistic about the future? Difficult time, but I can be optimistic when we succeed to educate people against extremism and to be more tolerant and accepting the others and living together.

When I want to understand my history as a Muslim, I need this Jewish part to understand the history of the Jewish part. And it is the same thing for the Jews. Moroccan Jew, when he wants to understand his Jewish history, he should understand Moroccan history and the history of Moroccan Muslim side.

You've been listening to Heart and Soul from the documentary. The program was written and presented by me, Mike Lanshin. It's a CTVC production for the BBC World Service.