**Memories of Mobilization: Yom Kippur in the Ma‘arif *Mellah***

It was the eve of Yom Kippur and we had returned from exercises. The canteen bell sounded, but we Israelite conscripts were permitted to go to the *mellah[[1]](#footnote-1)* in Ma‘arif, a few kilometers from Casbah Ben Ahmed, where we were garrisoned.

We headed westward over successive plateaus that were traversed by a beautiful trail between tilled fields. There were few trees on the horizon but in the farthest distance was the blue outline of the Mdakra mountains. We marched at a lively pace since we had to arrive before sundown.

We climbed a final incline and there, amidst the somber green of the cactuses and the grayish green of the fig trees, we saw a mass of cabins covered in thatch and little white houses with terraces and black tents. Ma‘arif.

They had seen us from afar and a crowd of Jews ran barefoot to meet us, each with a black yarmulke on the upper forehead and a fulsome calico robe that rippled with every movement and swelled in white billows in the wind.

What expressions of delight and fervor we were met with! Each one took a soldier by the arm and proudly marched along with him, those who had arrived late were disappointed to have to return alone. The Arabs watched us in procession with a benignly childlike curiosity.

I was the guest of a local notable who owned a stone-built house at the rear of the quarter. Facing a square courtyard was a vast, immaculate room with rugs on the floor and a mattress along the wall.

He did not waste time in idle chatter. It was late and we quickly sat at table. It was already the hour for prayer, the time when the great fast of atonement would begin. The meal was copious but far too spicy. The mistress of the house reclined alongside us, encouraging us to help ourselves to the plenty on offer.

We arrived at the temple via an infinity of narrow passageways covered with a thick blanket of fumes kicked up by every animal in creation – donkeys, mules, horses, and camels – in and amongst which farmyard birds pecked away. The doors were open on the immaculate little houses, whitened with quicklime for the festival, and women and young girls who had decked themselves in their best high days clothes looked on at us with a touching pride. We were Jews and soldiers of conquering France at one and the same time. We ruled over the Arabs. It was complicated matter for the crude intelligence of country-dwelling Jewesses. There was a mystery to it that they did not seek to elucidate. They were joyful and smiled at us with familiarity.

The temple, a vast earthen chamber with little skylights built into the ceiling was already jam-packed. There were wooden benches all around the walls, in the center of it all the *bimah,* and mats laid on the ground in any spare spaces between them. On the back wall there was a small white wood ark for the scrolls of the Torah. Oil lamps hung from ceiling beams on chains, giving off a black smoke and a powerful odor.

A few youngsters were ejected to make room for us, and all the children were otherwise left outside anyway. They gravitated towards the door and tried to worm their way in behind larger individuals, but the *cheih* pre-empted them with punches and kicks. The poor little things remained utterly contrite, having been so keen to take part in the prayers. Their whiny little voices replied “amen” fervently to the blessings offered in the service. When it ended, they went off to fool about and brawl among the animals. I could see them capering around in the brilliant light of the moon.

The prayers went on at length, their persistent chant touching the heart. Recalling that emotion is poignant when one thinks of the tragic events that would ensue on the frontline.

*To be continued*

1. The traditional Jewish quarter of towns in Morocco and elsewhere in the Maghreb. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)