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The Mediterranean Seminar Review

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Review Editor: Andrew Devereux (History: University of California San Diego)

Editorial Assistant: Aaron Stamper (History: Princeton University)

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**Reviewed by:** Jessica M. Marglin, Religion, University of Southern California  
([marglin@usc.edu](mailto:marglin@usc.edu))

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Emily Benichou Gottreich has set out not only to offer the first monograph dedicated to a synthetic study of the history of Jews in Morocco, from the early medieval period to the present: she intends to revise the way we think about Morocco entirely. Benichou offers “not a history of the Jews of Morocco,” but “a history of Morocco from the perspective of its Jews” (3). In so doing, she argues that Jews have been integral to the social, economic, cultural, and of course religious landscape of Morocco since the Islamic conquests in the seventh century. Gottreich concludes that Jewishness should be considered a “sixth pillar of Moroccan identity,” alongside better-known themes in Moroccan history (“Malikisim, Amazighity[,] Sharifism, Europeanization, and Arabness”). According to Gottreich, Jewishness is something “in which all Moroccans, to some extent, participate” (183).

This is a strong claim, and one that will be of particular interest to scholars of the Mediterranean. For even if Gottreich’s study is largely bounded by the political borders that have historically defined Morocco, she puts questions of inter-religious relations and coexistence at the center of her book. In choosing to write a history of Morocco from a Jewish perspective, she puts confessional diversity at the heart of Maghribi history. Rather than tell the story of Morocco’s Jews as an afterthought, or as a sub-section devoted to non-Muslims, Gottreich sees Moroccan history as inextricable from that of its Jews.

One way of situating Gottreich’s book in the historiography is to see it as an extension of the insights that arguably sparked Mediterranean Studies. While many cite Henri Pirenne as the first Mediterraneanist, it was Fernand Braudel who gave life to the field. And Braudel’s insight was precisely to push back against the religious divisions that lay at the heart of the Pirenne thesis. In the preface to the first English translation of *La Méditerranée* (from 1972), Braudel claimed—famously or infamously depending on one’s perspective—that “the Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian, that the whole sea shared a common destiny...”<sup>i</sup> And even if Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell disagreed with Braudel about almost everything, they, too, deliberately bridged the religious divisions that still dominate the history of the region in favor of a synthetic study that placed economic and social history above confessional divides.<sup>ii</sup> Gottreich’s insistence on telling the history of Jews in Morocco as inextricably bound up with Morocco’s history more broadly can be read as a way of insisting that Jewish Morocco and Muslim Morocco “lived and breathed with the same rhythms.”

She takes insights that lie at the heart of Mediterranean Studies and puts them to work in a nationally-bounded history.

Of course, Gottreich’s book is also an accessible and very welcome introduction to the history of Jews in Morocco—and, at the same time, to Moroccan history. It offers a readable and erudite overview, beginning with the origins of Jewish life in Morocco (which are shrouded in mythology; archaeological evidence dates only from the third century CE). I particularly like how Gottreich has organized her book: it is largely chronological, but also thematic. Thus each chapter reflects one of the five “pillars” of Moroccan identity. In her first chapter, which covers roughly the seventh to the tenth centuries, she traces the rise of Malikism and its importance for Morocco and Jewish-Muslim relations more broadly. Her second chapter focuses on Amazighity; she traces the rise of Amazigh-ruled empires in Morocco, as well as the far more recent alliance between Amazigh activists in Morocco and Jews. This less-than-strictly chronological approach makes her text far more lively, and emphasizes the ways her five themes run through Moroccan history from the early medieval period to the present. (I did at times wonder whether a student with little knowledge of either Moroccan history or that of its Jews might find this thematic approach a bit startling, and perhaps even hard to follow. Ultimately, though, I believe that Gottreich’s book offers a highly readable and accessible approach to the topic that is particularly welcome as text for undergraduates at all levels. And I think the benefits of a more lively text that weaves together past and present may very well outweigh whatever is lost by sacrificing the straightforwardness of a purely chronological approach.)

Gottreich’s method at times yields insights that suggest important revisions to the way the history of Jews in Morocco has generally been told. Her chapter tracing the rise of the ‘Alawi dynasty—which still rules Morocco today—is entitled “Sharifism.” As Gottreich explains, the distinctive treatment of *shurafā’* (s. *sharīf*), that is, people who can trace their bloodlines back to the Prophet Muhammad, was typical of North Africa. “But the elevation of Sharifism to a creed whereby political leadership was predicated on it is fairly unique to Morocco” (78). Gottreich connects the birth of the Moroccan Sharifi-based state in the seventeenth century to the consolidation of Moroccan Judaism. These were “not only concurrent processes but also contingent” (79). Both involved asserting authority over challenges posed by mystically inclined leaders—for the ‘Alawis, over Sufis at the head of powerful *zawiyas* (lodges with political power); and for Moroccan Jews, over Sabbatean leaders influenced by their coreligionists from the Ottoman Empire.

Gottreich’s work reconstructing the history of Sabbateanism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Morocco is, in itself, groundbreaking and welcome. This part of the book will also be of particular interest to Mediterraneanists, as she demonstrates just how tightly connected Moroccan Jews were to Jewish communities in the Ottoman heartlands. It was Ottoman Jews who sent news of the arrival of the “Messiah” Shabbatai Zvi, including Elisha Ashkenazi, who had served as an emissary (*shadar* in Hebrew) in Morocco, collecting funds for the poor Jews and the scholars of the holy land. Ashkenazi helped usher in a hugely popular messianic movement, in which entire communities of Jews came to believe that Shabbatai Zvi was the messiah. They were opposed by rabbinic authorities in Morocco and abroad, including the acerbic Jacob Sasportas, a North African rabbi who dedicated his life to rooting out Sabbateanism from his posts in Northern Europe. Understanding the struggle over Sabbateanism in Morocco as part of a reconfiguration of relationships between the *Makhzan* (central state) and Jews made me rethink North African Jewish history in the early modern period more broadly.

Gottreich's concluding chapter offers a helpful assessment of Moroccan Jews today—including a brief introduction to their diaspora, to their ongoing connections to Morocco, and, most controversially, to the ways in which the Moroccan state has come to champion its Jewish past. She explains that the Moroccan government often displays its close embrace of Moroccan Jews as a way to demonstrate its tolerance to Western allies and economic partners. But as she points out, "There is a sad irony in watching references to Jews in official discourse increase as the number of actual Jews declines" (179). Unlike other non-Muslims—many of whom converted out of Islam—Jews today are not as problematic for Moroccan officialdom. Nonetheless, Gottreich is correct to note the singularity of Morocco. It is, among other things, the only Arab government that has taken a firm stand distinguishing between Moroccan Jews as part of Moroccan society and its history on the one hand, and Zionism and Israel on the other. Even if this distinction does not always translate to the popular sphere, it is nonetheless an important step towards reclaiming the history of Jews as part of the history of North Africa and the Middle East. Gottreich has certainly made a powerful argument for doing this; I trust her book will help students and scholars alike understand the entanglement of Jewishness and Moroccanness, past and present.



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### Author Response:

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.

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<sup>i</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London: Collins, 1972), 14.

<sup>ii</sup> Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).