

Article

Screening Out Their Own: Muslim Gatekeepers of Jewish Spaces in Morocco

André Levy

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheva 8410501, Israel; andre@bgu.ac.il

Abstract: The literature on ethnic groups that were formed following migration reveals how symbolic and socioeconomic boundaries are manipulated by veteran groups to keep out the unwanted immigrants. It shows how these boundaries are to maintain and preserve the veterans' dominant position. The case of the tiny Jewish minority living nowadays in Morocco reveals a seemingly contradictory mechanism: Muslim gatekeepers, who are part of the huge majority in Morocco, screen out their coreligionists from Jewish spaces. This gatekeeping fortifies the Jewish notion of exclusive spaces within which they feel safe as a tiny and fragile community. A close ethnographic gaze reveals that screening out Muslims is enabled due to a shared "cultural intimacy" that permits the minority to control access to their spaces. This paper sheds light on a deep level of cultural understanding that allows Jews to maintain bearable life as a dwindling minority in Morocco—despite their motivations to be separated—by appointing Muslim gatekeepers.

Keywords: Moroccan Jews; religious minorities; gatekeepers; cultural intimacy

1. Boundaries at Risk

We were sitting for a Shabbat afternoon tea in the yard of the boarding high school of ENH (*École Normale Hébraïque*) in Casablanca. I was invited by the general director of the *Ittihad* educational system (known also as *Alliance Israélite Universelle*) for a special Shabbat that celebrated the approaching oral examination in Hebrew that was part of the students' *baccalauréat*—the French national academic qualification obtained at the completion of the *lycée* (secondary school). The examinations were to be held by two supervisors who came all the way from Paris. The ENH teachers seemed in unrest and anxious but did their best to appear calm, as it was clear that the French supervisors were also assessing their competence as Hebrew teachers.

Suddenly, a few stones were thrown in our direction from behind the high walls of the school. The subsequent sounds of laughter of boys seemed to unsettle the teachers, yet they did their best to restrain their reactions. We quietly moved our chairs to the interior of the compound, away from the reach of the stones, and continued to converse. After brief and futile attempts to proceed with the conversation interrupted by the stones, one of the male teachers, Monsieur Cohen, recollected an incident like that we just experienced, and that ended up as an educational lesson: he found the home of the Muslim boy who threw stones, but when his father wanted to punish his son, the teacher asked to instead demand the boy to put the stone he threw back to their original place. "It was an effective educational act!" declared with satisfaction Monsieur Cohen. Then, as if with no apparent reason, the conversations, which thus far were mostly about the Hebrew oral exams to be taken two days after, changed direction. It began with *Mme* Miriam Levy, a Hebrew teacher in her fifties, who briefly mentioned the story of a Jew who converted to Islam after getting married to a Muslim man. "I am sure she was drugged . . .," said Miriam. Her fellow teacher, *Mme* Emily Sitbon, elaborated: "everyone says that *sh'chur* (سحر, magic)¹ was involved. You can't explain otherwise why she would marry a Muslim! But then her



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parents went to a powerful (she) Jewish magician to undo the sh'chur. After a few months, that woman escaped to Europe."

Now more participants joined in the conversation on "mixed" intimate relationships between Jews and Muslims. Madam Ben-Amo recounted a formidable story of:

"a young obese Jewish woman who got pregnant after having sex with a young Muslim. She regularly returned late from work. But only for one hour a day. Her parents were not suspicious. Apparently, she spent that hour with her Muslim lover. No one could notice that she was pregnant because of her obesity, even in her ninth month. One day she simply disappeared. Her parents asked the help of the Jewish Community Offices to find their daughter. It took them only a couple of hours to find her. When she introduced her newborn to her finders nobody believed her, because she concealed her pregnancy so well. But then it was an undeniable fact. Here it was. Her parents asked the Jewish physician, who was to examine her the following day, to take the opportunity to secretly ask her if she was willing to escape and to assure her that her parents are not mad at her; to the contrary, they are willing to help. Due day, the physician asked everyone to leave, although according to Muslim law he cannot examine her without the presence of a woman (nurse). The father of the newborn, who was a kind person, agreed and even encouraged everybody to leave the room. And indeed, the physician followed the parents' instructions. However, the daughter did not respond to her parents' offer. A few days later the daughter heard that her mother is very ill . . . it was clear that she is expected to pay a visit to her mother. When she came to her parent's home, her parents drugged her and smuggled her outside Morocco. The father remained in Morocco with the baby . . . "

The event of the stone throwing, and the stories ensuing it, beg for symbolic interpretation; particularly, how passivity is rhetorically invoked when facing instances in which religious boundaries are crossed or threatened: through the spell that was cast upon the woman of the first story that removed agency from her, or how drugs freed the new mother from her responsibilities as a partner of her Muslim lover and a mother to her newborn. This rhetoric also released the Jews from the need to be accountable (to their communities) for their breaching of religious boundaries. Of the various interpretative venues which one can take, what was striking for me was the "here and now" dynamic that followed the throwing of the stones; namely, recruiting "passivity" that keep an appearance of control when this was deeply shaken. The appearance of control was presented either by the unconvincing demonstration of restraint following the throwing of the stones or by *discussing* parallel occurrences in which order was reestablished (putting the stones back to their original place) while Jews were unprotected or vulnerable. In sum, the collapse of the shielding exclusive Jewish space, manifested by the stones flying over the wall in our direction, was accompanied by a rhetoric of inaction.

Jewish notion of control is not to be put to test (Levy 2020). Apparently, for Jews living in Morocco today, a rhetoric of inaction, and more broadly—of passivity—is thus a useful (though not exclusive) way to keep the sense of control intact. To be sure, Jews do act when facing Muslims, as the concrete act of searching the missing daughter, or the recruiting of the physician, demonstrate. Passivity is a common rhetorical device of the Jewish minority; it does not attest to a concrete social (in)action. That rhetorical choice is recruited in instances when boundaries are crossed against Jewish will, and where cultural mechanisms that work to monitor the crossing of boundaries are not to be found. In the case of Jews in Morocco, one crucial and effective mechanism is the Muslim gatekeeper.

This paper will thus examine ethnographically the daily and down-to-earth dynamic of gatekeeping as a cultural mechanism that recruits a member of the majority group to protect the minority. That choice is of great interest because it invites in a member of a group that is expected to be excluded. By so doing, members of the minority group expose their most intimate secrets that they wish to conceal from the Muslim majority. That invitation in grants Muslim gatekeepers an opportunity to have a close gaze on the feeble group,

is tolerable due to shared “cultural intimacy” (henceforth), which makes that seemingly paradoxical move transparent to all.

2. Political Vulnerability and the Constitution of Cultural Boundaries

It would be almost redundant to state that cultural boundaries and their operation are at the heart of this study. As the opening vignette shows, it deals with what seems to be a transgression of a boundary that separates two distinct religious and ethnic groups. The study of boundaries is vast; it preoccupied social scientists such as Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, and anthropologists such as Boaz, Benedict, Mead, and Douglas. The overwhelming literature on this topic is easier to capture with the assistance of comprehensive reviews that offer tools to approach it. [Lamont and Molnár \(2002\)](#), for instance, suggest that researchers distinguish between two types of boundaries: symbolic and social. For them, the former “are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality” ([Lamont and Molnár 2002](#), p. 168). Social boundaries, on the other hand “are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities. They are also revealed in stable behavioral patterns of association, as manifested in connubiality and commensality” (*ibid.*). Ethnographically, however, distinguishing between the two analytical types of boundaries is practically impossible if one adopts an interpretative approach (like I do); boundaries, like any other human phenomenon, are manifested simultaneously: as social agents, people *do* act but their actions are unseparated from meaning they infuse in them ([Geertz 1973](#)).

Following the pioneering work of Barth, I argue that interethnic encounters take place at the boundaries that supposedly partition ethnic groups. Indeed, boundaries do not separate between ethnic groups; they are the very locus of interactions. In Barth’s words: “ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built” ([Barth 1969](#), p. 10). I wish to take one step ahead and clarify that gatekeepers serve as facilitators that mediate interactions in the boundary. They are positioned in entry/exit points along the lines of ethnic boundaries as they monitor the circulation of people who identify themselves (or are identified by others) as pertaining to different groups. To be sure, the kind of interactions between ethnic groups is affected by power relationships between them. When vulnerable ethnic groups interact within themselves, they can eschew the blunt reality of their weakness. However, absolute self-isolation is rare; minorities cannot avoid meeting other, more powerful groups, within what the literature has named “spaces of encounter” ([Leitner 2012](#)). In these spaces, their inferiority and vulnerability are apparent to all.

The increasing study of spatial encounters between politically uneven groups often focuses on tensions between long-time residents and new migrants ([Allen and Turner 1996](#); [Nelson and Hiemstra 2008](#); [Winders 2005](#)). By and large, these relationships are constituted by the human flow from “second” and “third” world countries to the abundant West. This migration leads to studies that portray spatial encounters between groups in which the powerful long-term resident is ethnically and/or racially unmarked, while the Others are newly arriving groups marked by distinct, often visible, traits ([Romero 2008](#)). Encounters between migrants who recently arrived from a different cultural ecology and veteran local groups are saturated with a sense of strangeness. In their encounters, the deracinated newcomers, like their hosts, experience in myriad ways misunderstanding. This, according to the research, unavoidably “incite processes of Othering and racialization, [that] are marred with racism, elicit strong emotions (primarily fear), and result in frictions, conflicts, and contestations” ([Leitner 2012](#), p. 829).

A fundamental premise mutual to these studies is the existence of frictions and tensions generated not only by cultural differences and strangeness but also (and often primarily) by the very fact that these groups “find themselves thrown together” in shared spaces of

encounters (Leitner 2012, p. 829). The subjects of these studies are the disenfranchised groups, which usually means that the “ethnic problem” results from their status as ‘strange’ and extrinsic immigrants.

This article relates to a socio-political and cultural context that like the cases mentioned above underwent a massive migration. But, unlike them, it does not involve immigration but rather emigration. That is, my anthropological gaze is not towards the migrating people in their new, strange, hosting country. The unique case here observes the dynamic between the massive Muslim majority and the minuscule Jewish minority that chose not to emigrate along with their coreligionists but rather stay put in Morocco. Unlike the case of Whites in South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008), for instance, migration is a key experience that formed the groups as a minuscule minority and colors their daily experiences. However, like Whites in South Africa (Crapanzano 1986), Jews are waiting for their extinction as a community; they live under the straining sense that they are doomed as a collectivity because of their unstoppable diminution.

One way to cope with this demographic and political dramatically unequal reality is by fortifying a sense of control that is partially maintained by appointing Muslim gatekeepers to protect their spaces. They entrust Muslims with a task that releases Jews from being active in their own protection. With this passive way, they hope to minimize the instances in which they risk to “find themselves thrown together”. Crucial to indicate already at this point is that the spaces that Muslim gatekeepers monitor are neither uniquely Jewish nor always successfully protected.

To comprehend this socio-political and cultural way of life that necessitates the employment of Muslim gatekeepers, a short, even brief, historical contextualization is needed.

3. The Emigration of Moroccan Jews

Demographically, Jews were dispersed all over Morocco for a very long period (Boum 2010; Laskier 2012). Some estimate that Jews lived in North Africa as of the destruction of the Second Temple. Hirschberg (1965, p. 5) contends that the first documentations of Jews living west of Egypt date to the third century BC, during the rule of Ptolemy I (367 BC–282 BC). Jews lived in cities, towns, and small villages. The wide scattering of Jews was to be changed in shape following a royal decree in the 15th century, which demanded Jews to concentrate in distinct spaces known in due time as the *mellah* (Bilu and Levy 1996; Flamand 1957; Gottreich 2007; Miller 1998). This spatial concentration did not involve a socio-cultural disconnect between Jews and Muslims as their wide spatial dispersion throughout Morocco lent itself to intensive and daily interactions with Muslims. Yet, these encounters were based on unequal relationships. After all, Jews were considered *dhimma*—a monotheistic minority that is free to practice its religious rituals but that was symbolically and politically subjugated to Islam. The concrete implementation of the *dhimmi* status to actual life was quite diverse, as it was often the case that the practicalities of being a *dhimmi* differed according to time and space (Gottreich 2020, pp. 26–30).

This intricate socio-cultural fabric was to be changed gradually towards modern times, and it is lucidly manifested in the gradual, yet steady, Jewish move to cities and towns. By the 18th century, a large portion of Moroccan Jews lived in urban spaces. Although Jews did not exceed 3% of the entire Moroccan population (less than 100,000 souls) in the mid-19th century, different censuses estimate that between 25% and 40% (depending on the poll) of the Jews lived in central cities. At the end of that century, more than 60% of Moroccan Jews lived in those cities while, at the same time, 80% of the Muslim population was rural (Abitbol 2004).

The moderate changes following historical events came to an end and were irrecoverably destroyed by intense and galloping historical developments: French colonialism (formally established in 1912), the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and the establishment of a free Morocco following the end of French colonialism (1956). A dramatic outcome of these developments was a massive Jewish emigration. In about 70 years, the Jewish population in Morocco dropped fast. While in its peak (the 1940s) Jews numbered between

250–300 thousand souls, in the 1980s they numbered about 5000 people and nowadays there are less than 1800 Jews all over Morocco, most of whom (about 90%) live in Casablanca. Indeed, after two thousand years, Morocco is (almost) emptied of its Jews.

As minuscule as the community might be, I nevertheless wish to focus on the Jews who remained put in Morocco, instead of doing what the sociology of migration often does: follow the migrants in their new socio-cultural ecology. And unlike the study of spaces of encounters, I do not focus on a field that is saturated with strangeness; the study introduced here is based on an ethnographic setting in which two groups are quite familiar with each other. As said in the above brief historical account, Jews and Muslims in North Africa share a long, intimate history. The relationship between the Jews and Muslims in present-day Morocco is culturally intimate. Yet, that intimacy is saturated with ambivalence (Levy 1994), which is dealt with through sociocultural mechanisms that enable, as well as stem from, a shared “cultural intimacy”. This concept, borrowed from Herzfeld’s work, refers to “the recognition of those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation” (Herzfeld 1997, p. 3). Elsewhere Levy (2020) has demonstrated that while relationships are ambivalent, and while this ambivalence drives Jews to strive for separate and exclusive spaces, this drive can be attained only by the cooperation of Muslims. That is, while Jewish exclusive spaces are there to prevent Muslims to be exposed to embarrassing expressions Jews utter about them, they need Muslims to constitute and maintain these spaces. Moreover, these Muslims are witnessing the expressions and utterances that should be concealed from them. That confusing complex state is made possible because all involved share a cultural intimacy on a deeper level. Both Muslims and Jews fully understand and accept the need for exclusive Jewish spaces.

In this paper, I will focus on one sociocultural mechanism that fortifies the *sense* of control over these exclusive Jewish spaces, and at the same time, how this mechanism stems from the sense of shared cultural intimacy with them. Particularly, I will analyze the dynamics between Jews and their Muslim gatekeepers that allow the minuscule Jewish minority to keep (almost) intact the *idea* that they can hold exclusive protecting Jewish spaces.

4. Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers, or “the guardians of the threshold” as called by Leach (1983, p. 253), are symbolically positioned betwixt and between. Presumably, like a bridge, the gatekeeper holds the foot in two places, enabling a safe and monitored passage from one side to the other.² This view assumes that the gatekeeper is someone who moves between cultures to provide information that is essential to link people; it sees the gatekeeper as a facilitator, or mediator (Kurtz 1968).

Yet, gatekeepers are not like an indifferent bridge; they are active agents who hold power: they hold the mandate to include and exclude. Indeed, as Singh and Douglas claim, the gatekeeper is “someone who controls access to an institution or an organisation” (Singh and Wassenaar 2016, p. 42). Their control appears in various ways. Sometimes, the work of gatekeeping is executed by holding resources crucial for having access to a social or political realm (Beresford 2015). Since gatekeepers have the mandate and ability to monitor the access to resources and opportunities, their work risks igniting “a volatile and sometimes violent battle over who controls the ‘gate’” (Beresford 2015, p. 229). Surely, this risk exists only when the partitioning work of gatekeeping, or better the “boundary work” (Gieryn 1983) is not transparent to all involved (see Bourdieu 1979).

Unlike an indifferent bridge, the social identity of the gatekeeper might turn part and parcel of the logic that guides the work of selection. Indeed, some researchers have argued that the principle of homophily—the love of the same—is of crucial importance in understanding the logic of selection. Homophily implies “that distance in terms of

social characteristics translates into network distance” (McPherson et al. 2001, p. 416). Gatekeepers, thus, will screen out those who are perceived as “different” from them. According to this logic, homophobia, which guides the work of screening out, might work to produce homogeneity. The work of screening out is based on essentialized identities that lean on preemptive mechanisms that facilitate a wide range of manifestations of xenophobia: misogyny, racism, antisemitism, and alike. Indeed, the principle of homophily explains, according to feminist approaches, men’s screening out of women in their efforts to take a position, for instance, in academia (e.g., Van den Brink and Benschop 2014). In the same vein, that logic works to exclude, for instance, LGBTI people by Black Churches gatekeepers, “as they see same-sex relationships and policy as oppositional to the Black identity and Black sociopolitical progress” (Lewis 2022, p. 1; see also Kumah-Abiwu 2019). Or, for instance, teachers and career counselors in USA schools act like gatekeepers; they have a priori racist stereotypes about African American students; they underestimate their learning abilities and their chances to succeed (Shizha et al. 2020).

Homogeneity, the result of gatekeeping, is a tool to constitute, maintain, and fortify social superiority (Snyder 1976). That superiority is fortified by the very ability to be included in a social sphere that excludes Others. These Others, (as Ours) confirm the reality of hierarchy and validate its objectivity. Gatekeepers, thus, are part of a toolkit aimed at attaining these sociological results.

Keeping in mind the effect of homophobia, the case of Muslim gatekeepers that maintain exclusive Jewish spaces is thus particularly intriguing, as they appear to do just the opposite of what the literature argues: they seem to be screening out their own. In what follows, I will thus present the role and positions of Muslim gatekeepers in Jewish life in contemporary Morocco.

5. Guards and Gatekeepers of Jewish Spaces

Although not completely absent, instances like the otherwise inconsequential event of stone-throwing are relatively rare. Jews use several strategies to deter such possible threats that, besides their immediate risk, might undermine the very idea that they can maintain safe Jewish spaces; an idea that is crucial to the tranquil continuation of the Jewish presence as a tiny minority in Morocco (see Levy 2020). One important way to deal with such perils is by hiring Muslim gatekeepers or placing guards as a preemptive measure that monitors encounters within spaces that are considered by Jews as their safe havens. Gatekeepers and guards are ideal for Jews as they maintain the appearance of passivity: they avoid what they conceive as problems, hence minimizing the need to react, and they entrust Muslims with a job that releases Jews from the work of monitoring and selection.

To be sure, the reason behind the need to have safe havens does not escape the eyes of the Jews: fear for personal and collective safety. Hence, most Jews see these safe havens as a necessary evil. As Monsieur Butboul, a Jew in his late fifties, told me: “Morocco is perfect. All is perfect for me here. And not only for me but also for my family as well. Well, heck! For all Jews here. But there is this little problem that we must face, and that no one can deny. A little problem called fear. Otherwise, Morocco is just a paradise.” Mr. Butboul was not unique in allowing these moments of realization that paradise was not perfect. I was about to return home from the CA (*Circle de l’Alliance* Jewish club) when David Ohanah offered me a lift. It was apparent that he wishes to share with me thoughts since he knew that I lived within a walking distance from the club:

“We live here like a ghetto! We have no place for recreation; no place to have fun. We live on a deserted island. If I were young, I would have left. Here one is afraid. One needs to take some tranquilizers to live here. I don’t take them, but I should. I try not to reflect on the fact that we live amongst Muslims. But, in situations like wars [in the Middle East] you become aware of the danger.”

For Moroccan Jews, unawareness is, apparently, bliss, but, as said above, minorities cannot eschew the blunt reality of their fragility for long. Muslim gatekeepers are meant to deal with just that; to lower the sense of fear. Indeed, the very physical presence of Muslim

gatekeepers supports the notion of Jewish safe spaces and validates their concrete reality as well as their efficacy.

Before delving into the role of gatekeepers in Jewish life, it is of value to note that not all guardians that are positioned to protect Jewish spaces are considered gatekeepers. One should distinguish between formal guardians and gatekeepers. The first includes policemen, for instance, who are positioned in Jewish spaces either regularly, or according to intermittent needs. In addition to a guardian financed by the Jewish community, the Lazama synagogue in the mellah of Marrakech is regularly guarded by a rotating pair of policemen during its opening hours. For professional reasons, these policemen are replaced by the chief officer of the local headquarters every three months or so. Hence, no long-term relationships can be established between them and local Jews (or Muslims) who work on the premises. Likewise, tens of policemen guard Jewish sporadic events, such as *hilloulot* (events that are celebrating the death anniversary of Jewish pious men and that gather a relatively large number of Jewish pilgrims). These policemen, amongst them plainclothes policemen whom everyone recognizes, are positioned in their specific places according to the state's security considerations and usually for no longer than a day or two. Therefore, they are *not* part of what I conceive as gatekeepers that are positioned (and financed) by the Jewish community and according to its motivations and who can hold long-term relationships with people who occupy the space they monitor. Yet, like the gatekeepers, their very presence is seen by Jews as a state's confirmation of the validity of distinct Jewish spaces. When a group of elderly Jews traveled on a bus to the holy site of Rabbi Raphael Anqaoua in Salé (adjacent to Rabat), the Jewish guide announced to all:

“Look how all these policemen who surround us pay respect to our Torah! Even Muslims acknowledge the tsaddiq's sanctity ... They came specially for us ... they are here to smooth our entry and will guard us in the old cemetery of Salé. We, Jews, are unique in Morocco!”

6. Muslim Gatekeepers

All safe havens that Muslim gatekeepers monitor are territorial. They are spatially bounded spaces that are supposed to be unmistakably Jewish. Surely, the demarcation of synagogues as Jewish is uncontested. However, there are spaces that although conceived as Jewish, are not devoid of Muslims. Schools are a clear example of that. Before the massive migration of Jews in the 1950s to the early 1960s, practically all Jewish schools were religiously uniform. Nowadays most Jewish schools (e.g., *École primaire Narcisse-Leven* or *Lycée Maimonide*) are composed of a Muslim majority that partly participates in the Jewish curriculum (notably, Hebrew lessons). A towering exception is ENH (mentioned at the outset of this article), which still insists on accepting Jewish kids only.³

A quick look at Muslim gatekeepers in Jewish institutions gives the impression that instead of the principle of homophily, the principle of xenophilia defines their role and guides their actions. Muslim gatekeepers allow entry to Jewish spaces to Jews, while preventing entry to their coreligionists. They do so in literal gates, such as club gates, school gates, graveyard gates, or in many other community institutions' gates. Interestingly, entry is not only permitted to Moroccan Jews, but to every Jew, including Israeli tourists during the period that Morocco and Israel had no overt and formal political relationships.⁴ The screening based on religious identity thus prevents citizens of Morocco from entry to institutions in their own country while allowing entry to citizens of foreign countries. This kind of selection based on religious identity was described to Levy by an interlocutor who testified that to prevent Muslims access to a Jewish youth club, he announced to Muslim parents who wished to enlist their kids to this institution that every Friday all participants are required to bless on the wine and have a sip, knowing that alcohol is forbidden to consume by Sharia laws (Levy 2003, p. 381).

Indeed, aside from protection, gatekeeping is there to assure homogeneity. Yet, due to their demography, and as the case of Jewish schools demonstrates, Jews are unable to establish an impenetrable autarchy based on religious identity. Hence, Jews might employ

gatekeepers that instead of establishing a purely Jewish space, constitute a homogeneous sociocultural space that matches their needs. The work of gatekeeping may constitute, even if momentarily, a sphere in which those who are let in seem homogeneous. Levy (1999) has described such a dynamic between Jews and Muslims on a private beach in Casablanca, Morocco. According to him, while the overall political power is uneven (Muslims being the powerful part), the work of gatekeeping screens entry to the beach on a social and economic basis, thus suspending the otherwise crucial religious identity as a relevant player in the social Moroccan dynamic. This gatekeeping enabled an appearance of equality between Jews and Muslims within the confines of the beach. In this case, the work of gatekeeping is performed by abstract social mechanisms and not concrete human beings. In his words:

“By gate keepers I refer to the sociocultural and economic barriers that regulate the profile of those who enter the beach. First, only people who can afford the admission price can enter. Second, religious restrictions contribute to the beach’s exclusiveness: those who do not approve of body exposure will not come either. Thus, orthodox Jews and Muslims will not attend the beach. These gatekeepers blur external differences between Jews and Muslims. People from both groups are part of the same socio-economic stratum that, essentially, is associated with a local version of French culture” (Levy 1999, p. 640).

As said, however, I concentrate on human gatekeepers, and not abstract socio-economic and cultural mechanisms that homogenize bounded spaces. This distinction is of analytic importance as it relates to aspects of gatekeeping as an action made by social actors, and not abstract constructs that have a concrete influence on social life. As such, gatekeepers’ positioning may influence the work of monitoring as well as the social dynamic within the space they monitor. Take, for example, gatekeepers who are excluded from the realms they let others enter (e.g., Corra and Willer 2002). Such is the case with the border police who cannot afford to visit the destinations of tourism they monitor. I, myself, have witnessed border police in Morocco compensating for this frustrating deficiency in various innovative ways (e.g., asking for baksheesh). Indeed, the case of exclusion of the gatekeepers is often based on economic logic (such as doormen who cannot afford to live in the building they attend). However, Moroccan gatekeepers of Jewish spaces do not fully align with this economic facet. Surely, it has an economic aspect, as most members of Jewish clubs, for instance, are much more affluent than their gatekeepers. However, in the case presented here, cultural logic is of crucial importance.

The fact that the gatekeeper pertains to a different, and ideationally impermeable group, is of critical importance to Jewish life in Morocco. To begin with, their weak political stature does not allow Jews to appoint Jewish gatekeepers. They have no legitimacy to deter a Muslim from getting in. Indeed, one of the more experienced gatekeepers of the CA told me: “A Jew cannot tell an Arab to go away. It is impossible for him. Such a demand coming from a Jewish mouth will be an insult to Arabs. It is impossible!”

The principle of *ideational social impermeability* is at the heart of gatekeeping. By ideational social impermeability, I refer to the idea that in social reality one should not cross group boundaries. This principle is not implemented equally since Jews do not hold the same power as Muslims. A clear example of this uneven model of relationships is revealed in marriage patterns: de facto, Jews can marry a Muslim only if the former converts to Islam. Since marriage is recognized only if performed by a religious authority the couple cannot hold their separate religious identity. One of the two must convert. In principle, converting from Islam is not forbidden by state law, but, although “Morocco’s penal code does not criminalise conversion from Islam- but rather guarantees the freedom of faith, article 220 penalises the ‘shaking of a Muslim’s faith’, referring to minors and economically disadvantaged people who might be vulnerable to conversion” (El Haitami 2021, p. 15), a restriction that practically avoids conversion from Islam.

Implementing this model of uneven relationships to the field of gatekeeping means that the symbolic power to allow entry is always held by a Muslim. Indeed, symbolically, the work of gatekeeping seems like a modern transformation of the pre-colonial “patron-

client” relationships in which every Jewish family was subjugated to a Muslim patron, who was committed to protecting “his Jew” in return for his subjects’ loyalty (and other economic duties) (Meyers 1996). A well-known example of patron-client relationships appears in Geertz’s (1973) famous Marmusha vignette, in which he describes how tribesmen were compelled to threaten revenge on a neighboring tribe, since “their” Jew was hurt. Another ethnographic example of the cultural persistence of these relationships appears in Rosen’s (1968) article, where he describes a cultural continuation of “patron-client” relationships in the mid-20th century. In this case, Rosen describes how Muslims, whose ancestors were the patrons of a Jewish family, stands at the door of that family in a politically stressful time (during 1967 war) in order to protect them. However, gatekeeping is not a simple continuation of a past tradition; after all, it is the Jews who employ gatekeepers, hence turning the Muslim dependent (in his income) on the Jew.

Note that this historical perspective demonstrates the dynamism in Jewish–Muslim relationships of recent decades. Jews are not *de facto* dhimmis anymore. Even if limiting our perspective to gatekeeping, change is apparent. I noticed that during the 1990s, when the Jewish community in Casablanca numbered some 5000 people, and when most of its institutions functioned properly, the gatekeepers of Jewish clubs were restricted entry to only the lobby. However, that state of things changed dramatically a few decades later. Nowadays, when the Jewish population in Casablanca dropped to less than 1500 people and most institutions barely function, Muslims participate in the clubs’ activity and gatekeepers come and go as they please.

7. Intimacy of Gatekeeping

The work of gatekeeping conducted by Muslims is varied according to the function of the space they guard and thus demands from the Muslim gatekeepers a different depth of cultural intimacy: specifically, religious versus secular spaces. Gatekeepers of religious spaces (notably, graveyards and synagogues), who will be the focus of my gaze here, demand intimate relationships with the cultural practices of the spaces they guard. Usually, these relationships spread over a long period; hence these gatekeepers are often relatively older men.

Listen, for instance, to the story of Abdullah (in his late sixties), who served for many years as a gatekeeper in Casablanca. His life story is enmeshed with Jews’ lives:

I was born in Sidi-Rhal (near Taroudant). I know the *tsaddiq* (righteous man) Rabbi David Ben Barouch is buried there.

All my childhood I was not far from the *tsaddiq*. Even today, the site is kept very clean and respected by Muslims who live nearby. They do not allow even cows or other animals to approach the site; they don’t allow to desacralize the *maqbara* (مقبرة/graveyard). The site is meticulously kept.

Once, when I was young, I came to visit a relative in Casablanca. I was walking around in the street when a Jewish woman asked if I needed a job as a waiter. It was *Le Coq d’Or* [a cabaret established by the famous Jewish singer Salim Halali]. She wanted me to start that day, but I refused and started working the next day. I also bargained for my salary. I don’t know how I could be so audacious. I came from a little village to a big city! She agreed, but my parents were very angry because it meant that I would disconnect from my family. The [Jewish] boss was kind and generous. He treated me like a son and invited me many times for dinner. Many members of the CA came to the *Le Coq d’Or* and got to know me; they saw that I am a good and energetic worker. Some years later, Mr. Abitan, who was the president of the CA, offered me a job. They doubled my salary. I was hoping that my boss in *Le Coq d’Or* would match, but he couldn’t. So, I switched bosses. And since that time, I worked in different jobs, always with Jewish bosses. So, my life as an adult, and even as a boy, was always with Jews. Always. I never got a salary from a Muslim.

Abdullah's life story manifests long-term and intimate relationships with Jews. This fact is remarkable since, even nowadays (i.e., after the establishment of open and formal political ties between Morocco and Israel) almost all Muslims never met a Jew face-to-face. Not only Abdullah demonstrates respect for Jewish practices, and not only he needs to testify that his past neighbors and friends respect the sanctity of holy places, but he also reveals knowledge of Jewish practices. This knowledge served him well as a gatekeeper of a synagogue during the time we met. He knew of holidays and their unique traditions. For instance, he helped build a Sukkha (a specific kind of booth) on the holiday of Sukkot (see Figure 1).⁵



Figure 1. A Muslim building a Sukkha.

Here is another encounter with a gatekeeper, who, although quite young, was third in a chain of gatekeepers in his family. He lived in a small-scale town at the foothills of the Atlas Mountains and took care of an old graveyard that had no Jewish community any longer. "All [Jews] left for France and Israel", he told me.

Me: How do you survive here?

Him: Well . . . my basic salary comes from the Jewish Organization. But their salary is meager. It hardly suffices for providing food . . .

Me: So . . . why do you keep this job?

Him: My father used to attend the *me'arah* (literally: cave, but it means graveyard in the Jewish Maghrebi dialect). So did his father before. And look, I get nice donations from Jewish pilgrims who visit the tsaddiq buried here . . . They come from France, Canada, the USA, and Israel. They are very generous . . .

Me: But what do you do when you don't have tourism?

Him: Yes . . . You are correct. That's what happened to me a few months ago. There were no tourists, and I couldn't do with the Community's salary. I decided to stop working here. You know, I whitewash fading tombstones, clean up around, weed the weeds, restore falling tombstones, nothing much. I did not yet notify the Community person [my decision to quit] when I had a terrible dream. In my dream, I saw a tall man, with bright white jellaba, a long white beard, flushing cheeks, and shiny eyes. He reproached: "Why did you decide to abandon me?!", and he pulled my left ear.

I woke up in a panic, all sweating, and my left ear was more and more in pain. I did not understand what was going on with me. I was totally confused. But the pain was so strong that I went to a physician. He gave me a small bottle of strong eardrops for my ear, but it did not help. I then went to an old man in our town who makes powerful *sh'chur*. He set a small fire and let the smoke of the *bkhor* (البخور, incense) enter my soaring ear.

This did not help as well. I was helpless. The pain was terrible. Then, I went to our *qadi* (قاضي). He questioned me about the chain of events. And when I told him about my decision to stop attending the tsaddiq grave he was horrified: "Are you crazy?! What a foolish decision! No one can help you against the tsaddiq's wrath. You have one course of action only. You must go to the Jewish community Rabbi and ask him what to do." And so, I did. The Rabbi told me that 'the tsaddiq does not agree that you leave him . . . he will take care of your income. You must continue with your job at the cemetery!' he instructed. And indeed, the day after my return to work at the *me'arah* my pain was gone!

I do not wish to discuss here the meanings of the common genre of how the Jewish tsaddiq intervention is revealed to Muslims (for that, see [Ben-Ami 1998](#)). Instead, I wish to underscore that, unlike Jewish clubs, for instance, places such as synagogues or cemeteries carry Jewish attributes that not only are unmistakable and undoubted, but religious, and require an intimate understanding of the guarded site. It seems impossible for the Muslim gatekeeper to maintain a cultural distance in such spaces. In positive terms—as the custodians of Jewish intimate practices, gatekeepers share with Jews a cultural intimacy. Hence, religious places require Muslims to be culturally close. In other words, the religious characteristics of the place allow, or maybe even enforce, intimacy to the symbolic meanings of the site they oversee. For long years, for instance, the Muslim gatekeeper of the Jewish graveyard, with its famous tsaddiq, Rabbi Amram Ben Diwane, in Asjan (near the northern city of Wazzane), was known as someone familiar with many hagiolatric practices associated with the tsaddiq. When, after long years of separation, Moroccan Israeli tourists arrived at the holy site for the first time, they could not recite even one *piyyut* (or plural: *piyyutim*, which is a Jewish liturgical poem) honoring the tsaddiq. Luckily, the Muslim gatekeeper salvaged them from their embarrassment. He enthusiastically sang aloud, reciting many *piyyutim* in Hebrew. Gradually, the tourists joined him ([Levy 1997](#)).

Not only intimacy is required from gatekeepers, but sometimes even a sort of blurring boundaries between the two religions involved (Judaism and Islam): whenever the gatekeeper of the Lazama synagogue in the old Jewish quarter of Marrakech had no time to walk to his mosque, he would spread his prayer rug, slightly modify the direction of prayer

from Jerusalem to Mecca and do his duty. His gestures did not reveal any hesitation or discomfort. The combination of intimacy with the need for a slight modification symbolizes the role of the gatekeeper. While the modification expresses distance and exclusivity, the same general direction manifests intimacy and inclusivity. Here, Geertz's claim comes to mind; when comparing Moroccan to Indonesian Islam he says: "they both incline toward Mecca, but, the antipodes of the Muslim world, they bow in opposite directions" (Geertz 1971, p. 4). I do not wish to get into the similarities between the two religions born in the desert, and that are preoccupied in deeds rather than beliefs, but the gatekeeper's prayer in a Jewish site certainly manifests intimacy.

Cultural intimacy is manifested here not only in the mutual recognition that Jews need protection, and that this protection could be offered by Muslims and non-others, but it is also manifested by the basic need to recognize Jews whom they do not know personally, or never have seen before. Interestingly, the ongoing need to recognize a Jew when you see one is the burden of the Jews as well (Levy 2020). As to Muslim gatekeepers, the repetitious answer to my questions to different Muslim gatekeepers "how do you know a Jew when you see one" was: "باينا فيه" (*bayna fih*, it shows). That ability to recognize a Jew, even as a tourist, is thus a skill that is essential for Muslim gatekeepers. Ironically, this skill, which stems from an intimate familiarity with Jewish body hexis, is recruited to implement separation. According to the gatekeeper's perspective, a Jew looks different from him. He, by definition, is weaker and fragile. He will never directly confront a Muslim. This attribute was confirmed by Jews: "*Baisse la tête!* (Head down!)" was a requirement explicitly made by community leaders in crisis times including in the presence of Muslim gatekeepers.

Yet, as guardians of the threshold, Muslim gatekeepers were tainted by Jewish fragility. I do not refer here to how other Muslims treated Muslims who were dependent on Jewish salary, but to the way Jews treated them. If in the public sphere, Jews treated gatekeepers with respect and dignity, then when they crossed the threshold and entered Jewish spaces, Jews demonstrated aggressive and unforgiving qualities and even used derogatory terms towards gatekeepers. They, for instance, assigned them with petits assignments (e.g., purchasing them cheap chewing gum) and tipped them five times its price. By doing so, they emphasized and even exaggerated the economic cleavage between themselves and the gatekeepers. These kinds of gestures were performed also by Jews who were not affluent, since stressing the gap released them from the idea that they are dependent on the protection of the gatekeepers.

8. Breaching Boundaries Again

As noted at the outset, the work of gatekeeping minimizes the breaching of ethnoreligious boundaries, but it cannot erect impenetrable walls. Moreover, sometimes gatekeepers just fail to do their job. It was a Shabbat morning in *Slat Lazama* (Lazama synagogue), the only synagogue functioning in the Mellah, and one of the two in Marrakech. The synagogue was half-full. Mr. Ohannah, who regularly tends the Lazama, looked pleased by the turnout. After all, it was rare to have almost three *Minyanim* (plural for Minyan, a quorum of ten adult Jewish men required for certain prayers) for the Shabbat *Shaharit* (morning prayer). For several years now the site has not functioned as a prayer place on weekdays due to the lack of 10 adult attendees. For unclear reasons, that specific Saturday morning the Muslim gatekeeper of the Lazama let a group of tourists in. As a rule, tourists were not allowed in during prayer hours.

The tourist guide, himself a Moroccan Muslim, encouraged the tourists to put *kippa* (yarmulke) to their heads. The guide, trying to demonstrate that there was no prevention to getting into the synagogue, left the patio of the complex and entered the synagogue. He stepped in during a section of the prayer that is considered particularly sacred and mystical, which demands the stopping of any casual conversations. Ironically, the guide entered the synagogue without *kippa* to his head. The worshipers ignored the incident. However, a short moment later, a mumbling voice came from the *Azara* upstairs (or *Ezrat Nashim*, women's section of the synagogue). It was Rachelle Buzaglo, the wife of Jacob,

one of the leading figures in Lazama. She was trying to catch the attention of her spouse without using words. Jacob chose not to respond. Rachelle did not give up and tried to draw his attention by raising her voice; Jacob still did not respond. At this point, the two other women present at the Azara joined Rachelle in her attempts to get the attention of the male worshipers. Jacob, like other men, insisted on ignoring Rachelle's gestures; but when Rachelle raised her voice to a degree that everyone could hear her, Jacob waved his hand toward her, dismissing her cry. "It's not important" he was forced to say. A few minutes later, the guide left the premises.

That minor incident demonstrates how Jewish men try to diminish the importance of events that breach their notion about monochrome Jewish spaces and even deny their importance altogether. They prefer doing so instead of confronting the fact that gatekeeping did not function. It is no wonder that no one reproached the gatekeeper for neglecting his duty to prevent non-Jewish visitors to enter the synagogue's compound on a Shabbat. After all, the very act of reproaching would turn the event meaningful. Like the pulling of the chairs quietly in the opening vignette, the consensual approach to deny the occurrence altogether served a better good: to keep intact the notion of Jewish spaces. This task was particularly challenging since women did not seem to cooperate with men's silence, because it was an unmistakable and uncontested Jewish space, and because it was a simple space to protect (a compound with one small gate).⁶

9. Concluding Remarks

A major branch of migration studies analyzes how ethnic boundaries are created to constitute, maintain, and fortify the superiority of the dominant group—the veterans. They describe, for instance, the exclusion of unwanted immigrants from the veterans' spaces. The work of spatial exclusion is executed by social actors as well as by constituting and maintaining notions regarding the reality of a Bourdieuan distinction that is to be respected by (of course) those who benefit from it, as well as by those who pay the toll of its socio-cultural reality. By and large, these studies often portray an image of a too clear-cut boundary separating dominant from dominated groups, in which the former enforces the spatial order upon the weaker groups.

The study presented here on the Jews living in current Morocco sheds light on these mechanisms of boundary work from a different, even intriguing, viewpoint. It showed how members of the dominant group—Moroccan Muslims who are employed by Jews as gatekeepers—collaborate in the work of separating spatial exclusivity in favor of the Jewish minority. This collaboration is not an outcome of distinction but instead a shared cultural intimacy. Indeed, the work of exclusion does not stem from a dominant standpoint. On the contrary, gatekeeping serves the Jewish need, as a fragile minority, to maintain the idea that they can hold Jewish spaces within which they live. Looking more closely at these intricate relationships shows that to maintain a separation, Muslim gatekeepers must share a deeper cultural understanding with Jews. They cooperate with Jewish inclination to exclude their own. On the other hand, Jews must share the view that they need Muslims to do the job of monitoring entry to Jewish spaces, and that only Muslim cooperation allows them to minimize encounters with them.

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Notes

- ¹ I use a transliteration that reflects Jewish pronunciation, but to avoid confusion, I also offer the reader the Arabic spelling.
- ² Note that I do not endorse a structural approach that assumes a stable ideal type of the gatekeeper. As the work of gatekeeping involves the power to control, I assume, following Foucault's understanding of power as working in a diffusing manner, that gatekeeping is unstable, changing in different contexts and along time (see [Foucault 1989](#)).
- ³ On the political and cultural logic of the division of Casablanca to Jewish and non-Jewish spaces, see: ([Levy 1997](#)).
- ⁴ There are two periods in which Israel had open diplomatic relationships with Morocco: 1995–2000 and from 2021 onwards.

- 5 A biblical holiday that, among a multitude of religious practices that were associated with it (e.g., pilgrimage to the Temple), requires from its practitioners to build a sukkah in which one presumably resides for seven days.
- 6 Elsewhere, Levy (2020) explains why, in a deeper level, the opposite reactions to the breaching of the Jewish space are in fact stemming from the same motivations, even if from different political positionings.

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