

Saving and Reviving Judeo-Moroccan at the National Library of Israel
Final Project Report
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Background

Judeo-Arabic languages are different versions of Arabic that were spoken by Jews in the Arab world. Arabic written with the Hebrew alphabet is also known as Judeo-Arabic. In the early seventh century, the Jews of the Middle East used two languages. They spoke a local dialect, and used Hebrew, the language of their prayers, for religious ceremonies and texts. Gradually, with the spread of Islam, Arabic replaced the local dialects. However, as in the rest of the Arabic-speaking world, Jews spoke different dialects of Arabic, depending on where they lived, and often borrowed words from Hebrew and Aramaic.

Jews in Muslim countries wrote Arabic in Hebrew characters rather than Arabic script. Egyptian-born Saadia Gaon, a prominent 10th century rabbi, Jewish philosopher, and Bible scholar, was the first to use Arabic for scholarly writing and is the founder of Judeo-Arabic literature. Thanks partly to his influence, Arabic took over from Aramaic as the language of Jewish scholarship, while Hebrew remained the ceremonial language. Some of the most important works of medieval Jewish thought were written in medieval Judeo-Arabic, including many written by Maimonides. Alongside theological and philosophical works, Judeo-Arabic came to be used as the language of daily life in communities throughout the Arab world, as seen in court documents, personal correspondence, press, theatrical and literary works, poetry and more. Each region and community developed its own version of Judeo-Arabic, including Judeo-Iraqi, Judeo-Moroccan, Judeo-Yemenite and more. In recent years, as those who once spoke these dialects age, a remarkable amount of interest has emerged among the younger generations who wish to preserve and connect to their heritage.

Current Statistics – Judeo-Moroccan

The vast majority of Morocco's 265,000 Jews emigrated to Israel after 1948, with significant emigration to Europe (mainly France) and North America as well. Although about 3,000 Jews remain in Morocco today, most of the younger generations speak French as their first language rather than Arabic, and their Arabic is more akin to Moroccan Arabic than to Judeo-Arabic. According to Prof. Moshe Bar-Asher, president of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, in Israel today there are currently 50,000 speakers of the various Judeo-Arabic dialects, though, naturally, their primary spoken language is Hebrew. Virtually all speakers of Judeo-Arabic are aging or elderly, with almost no one in the younger generations being raised speaking the language.

Judeo-Arabic Educational Programming at the National Library of Israel

Founded in 1892, the National Library of Israel (NLI) serves as the vibrant institution of national memory for the Jewish people worldwide and Israelis of all backgrounds and faiths. It has recently embarked upon an ambitious journey of renewal and is now opening access and encouraging meaningful engagement with the treasures of Jewish and Israeli culture as never before through a range of innovative educational, cultural and digital initiatives. Its iconic new home is currently under construction adjacent to the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) in Jerusalem.

The National Library of Israel is proud to hold the largest collection of textual Judaica ever amassed, including tens of thousands of items in Judeo-Arabic. As part of its renewal, in 2016 NLI began offering courses for the public, leveraging popular demand and interest to preserve the Judeo-Arabic language of Moroccan Jews, as well as other endangered languages. The initiative proved to be so popular that it garnered significant media attention, and at the request of a parliament member, a special course was even held at the Israeli Knesset (Parliament). Designed by experts, the courses expose participants to treasures from the National Library's world-class collection of written Judeo-Arabic materials, helping them learn to read and understand the materials both linguistically and in terms of their historical and cultural contexts. Through the courses, these texts, which were unused for many years without readers who could understand them, have been revealed to new audiences who are able to understand, speak and transcribe the language. Without understanding the language, the history of the various communities from which they came cannot be read nor studied.

These courses have created a growing community of learners who seek to preserve the language and explore the texts written in it. Members of this community are in on-going contact with one another, with their instructor and with the National Library and its staff. The community continues to expand, as its impact and extended learning community grows. The creation of an online educational environment will now enable the dissemination of this knowledge and interest in the topic to wider audiences in Israel and around the world.

Project Summary: Judeo-Moroccan Online Educational Environment

Thanks to the generous support of The Society for Endangered Languages, the National Library of Israel has created an online educational environment for Judeo-Moroccan based around a variety of sources and texts. The sources, some printed and some handwritten, include original and translated documents; religious, philosophical and ethical works; press; and much more. They reflect life in the various Moroccan Jewish communities, their histories, prayers, songs, colloquial expressions and overall cultural milieus.

The online educational environment contains the following elements:

1. High-quality images of original materials
2. Transcriptions of texts to make them easier to read and more useful as learning tools. This is particularly important as the handwritten materials and even much of the printed materials are very difficult to read, as they largely appear in scripts unfamiliar to modern readers.
3. Translation of texts into Hebrew (the mother tongue of most of the relevant target audience)
4. Audio recordings of text in the original language
5. Introductions to the historical and cultural contexts and background of given texts
6. Links to additional related materials at NLI and elsewhere, including relevant articles, Wikipedia pages, etc. For book and press excerpts, links are provided to the complete scanned items.
7. Comprehensive bibliographic listing of Judeo-Arabic sources, resources and research materials

In total, ten modules were created for the online environment, accompanied by images, transcriptions, translations, audio readings of them, and related links, as mentioned above. The online learning environment is [openly accessible](#) and free of charge, in accordance with the National Library of Israel's mandate and mission.

The following are a few select items included in the project:



[Articles from the "El Horria" \(La Liberté\) newspaper](#), which was printed between 1915 and 1922 and saw itself as representing and defending the interests of Moroccan Jewry. The excerpts include stories relating to Jewish communities around the world, and an advertisement.



Excerpts from [Historia Delyahud Delmarok Belarabiyya Metrezmana Min Lefransis](#), a history of the Jews of Morocco in Judeo-Moroccan. Published in 1952, the book is a translation by Haim Nahmani and his daughter Dina Nahmani of Yitzhak David Abu's French work *Musulmans andalous et judéo-espagnols*.



[Excerpts from Hemed Bahurim](#), a book including a range of practical Jewish laws, traditions, ethics and more translated into Judeo-Moroccan to be used by readers less well-versed in Hebrew. Contents include laws pertaining to prayers, Torah readings and visiting the sick; ethical teachings to be learned daily; liturgical poetry; and words of encouragement for learning Hebrew.



[Translation of "Bar Yochai"](#), one of the most well-known and beloved liturgical poems among North African Jews, written by the Kabbalist Rabbi Shimon Lavi, who was born in Spain in the end of the 15th century, fled to Morocco as a boy and later came to the Land of Israel. The poem is about the revered Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and is sung in many Moroccan synagogues every Sabbath.



["Kasida Delmizira"](#), a poem written in Judeo-Moroccan by Shimon ben Ephraim about the conditions in Morocco during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The poem provides a poignant, moving and artistic glimpse into the hardships faced by the Moroccan Jewish community during this difficult period in modern history.

Challenges and Recommendations

As with any project, we faced a number of unexpected challenges and would like to share some of them along with relevant recommendations to benefit others who may wish to undertake similar initiatives in the future. Firstly, as there are very few experts in Judeo-Moroccan, we had difficulty finding qualified people to implement some of the project elements. Moreover, the fact that someone is an expert in a specific language does not necessarily mean that s/he is an expert in all aspects of the language, nor in particular skills required for the project. Locating relevant experts and then finding the proper balance between expertise and skillset took significantly more time than we anticipated. We imagine these circumstances are relevant for other rare languages and would therefore recommend those embarking on similar projects take this into account.

The rare nature of the language and materials also meant that other processes take significantly longer than they would with more common languages. These include translating; transcribing; deciphering scripts that are no longer in use; locating copyright holders and clarifying copyright issues; identifying sources and contexts for texts, many of which have never been researched or written about; and defining and following transcription rules. Also, because Judeo-Moroccan is primarily a spoken language, there are many dialects and so decisions had to be made regarding which dialects to include and how to present them. Many if not all of these issues are probably relevant for other rare and endangered languages and so we hope that the insights will help others undertaking similar projects.

Looking Forward

Thanks to The Society for Endangered Languages, the creation of this online educational environment has enabled the National Library of Israel to expand and enrich its efforts to preserve the Judeo-Moroccan language and culture and make it accessible, thus saving these treasures from extinction and obscurity. We hope that the resources will continue to spur new interest in Judeo-Moroccan, providing a platform for those interested to not only learn about it, but also establish connections based around shared interests with the National Library team, scholars and other interested people and parties. The author of one of the items, for example, has shared additional materials she had at home with the National Library, which can now preserve these materials and share them with others.

We look forward to using the online educational environment and related materials to significantly improve and expand the Judeo-Moroccan Wikipedia entry, which will link to additional relevant materials, including the educational environment, of course. As Wikipedia is the world's leading reference source, we are certain that people interested in the topic will learn more about Judeo-Moroccan and benefit from the new online educational environment via this improved entry.

We hope that this portal will be expanded and serve as a pilot, which the National Library of Israel and other institutions around the globe can then apply to preserve and open access to other dialects of Judeo-Arabic and other endangered languages throughout the world.