

Video Clip: Mimouna

Morocco and select North African Communities

Mimouna is known today as a Jewish Moroccan festival, yet it has been celebrated across North Africa for generations. The evening that Passover ends, the Mimouna celebration begins and continues into the following day with festivities in the park. In North Africa it was a time to reconnect with one's Muslim neighbors after keeping quite distant throughout the days of Passover. Doors were opened, sweets were abundant, and foods were exchanged. It is a holiday of mutual respect, solidarity and harmony. It is also the foundation for the Hassidic Messiah Feast held that same evening.

Suggested Implementations

Holidays

1. Passover

Jewish History

1. An introduction to Jews in Arab lands
2. A springboard for a research project on Jewish holiday customs
3. A unit on Jewish diversity

Jewish Thought

2. Discussions on Jew/non-Jew relations
3. A unit on Hassidic Jewry

Background

On the night after the last day of Passover, Jews from North Africa celebrate a festival known as Mimouna. The reason for Mimouna is historically ambivalent. Even the root of the word is ambivalent. There are those who say that "Mimouna" stems from "mamon," or money; once the festival of freedom was complete it was a time to celebrate the abundance in one's life and ask for continued material gifts from God. There are others who say it stems from "ma'amin ana," a Judeo-Arabic mix meaning "believe (do) I." This refers to it being a time to reinforce one's connection to God as there was a natural disappointment when the holiday of freedom came and went and there was no messianic redemption. Still others tie it into the Arabic word for "ma'amoun," literally meaning "protected by God," but referring to wealth and prosperity. This is especially fitting as it is the beginning of the agricultural cycle. Still another explanation ties it into the father of Maimonides, Maimon, who was said to have died on that day. Many explanations abound.

Throughout the Passover holidays Jews across the Muslim world secluded themselves from their neighbors. There was a fear that wheat or breadcrumbs may accidentally enter one of their items, to the point that they would not even share a glass of water with their Muslim neighbors. According to Rabbi Professor Moche Amar, across Morocco, in the height of kosher concerns, they would even refrain from

milk products throughout the festival as it was their Muslim neighbors who had the milk cows and would produce the milk products. However, Jews did rely on the Muslims during the festival as they would give their sourdough bases to their neighbors to hold for them until after Passover. This sourdough base is used in place of yeast to make leavened bread.

Therefore, part of the post-Passover celebration was inviting Muslims back into the Jewish homes. Their neighbors would return the sourdough base (שאור) and bring over milk products. The Jews would make sweets and all types of breads. They would open their doors and people of both faiths would go door to door, eat, and reconnect.

In honor of the opening of the agricultural season, much of the foods served were greens, as well as fruits and vegetables. Dining tables were decorated with flowers, wheat stalks, and sometimes live fish in bowls (symbolizing birth and fertility). Golden rings were hidden in a bowl containing flour, suggesting hoped-for wealth or blessings. The dairy meal would include buttermilk, sweets, and *muffletta*, a kind of thin, doughy pancake often eaten with honey, syrup, nuts, and dried fruit. It was accompanied by singing, dancing, and visiting friends.

It was customary to invite engaged couples to dine at the fiancée's home where they would be served *muffletta* and fish. Since this was the traditional season for arranging marriages, young people would go out in the streets under their parents' watchful gaze. Old people would congregate on someone's front steps and would reminisce and tell stories.

Early on the morning of Mimouna, families that lived on the coast would head for the seashore. They would splash their faces with water and step barefoot into the ocean, symbolically re-enacting the crossing of the Red Sea which took place historically on the last day of Passover and ended in freedom. Jews living inland would go to the local wells, springs, and rivers and would pitch tents and celebrate with food and music. There was also a ritual of going to a garden at the gates of the city, following the blessing of the trees in the morning synagogue service, which was apparently based on a Talmudic tradition of going to the fields in the month of Nissan to recite prayers for the gift of blossoming trees.

Other customs of Mimouna in Morocco included the sending of gifts to brides by the bridegroom, visiting an ancient olive tree in a special garden in Marrakech where a special blessing was recited, and children dressing up as Muslims and Berbers (something usually prohibited in Muslim societies).

In Libya, a special challah type bread was baked with a hard-boiled egg in the middle. The bread is called *mimouna* as well and is a symbol of the circle of life. It was given to each family member as a special blessing on the night of the Mimouna when it is said, the heavens opened to welcome prayers.

The traditional Judeo-Arabic greeting by the host to his guests is:

תרבחו ותצעדו לעם הדא זו כאן אנא ולעם זיה בארץ ישראל

May you be blessed with wealth and go forth this year and next year in the land of Israel

Over the past 100 years it has evolved into simply: *Tarbakhu u-tsa'adu* – May you have success and go forth.

Across Israel today, it has become a day of park outings, barbeques, and one last day of family time. Across the world, Jews have begun to recreate these customs as a way of connecting to their Moroccan

heritage. Some communities, including us at the American Sephardi Federation, continue the tradition of a holiday of respect, solidarity and harmony by inviting Jews and Muslims to come together post-Passover and share in food, music and lively conversation.

בניסן נגאלו ובניסן עתידין להיגאל

In Nissan they were redeemed and in Nissan they will be redeemed in the future

Some Hassidic circles have evolved the holiday and created The Messiah Feast, סעודת המשיח. It is an evening of dancing, singing and food, encouraging people to keep their faith that the Messiah will come, especially after the festival of freedom came and went with no sighting.

Questions for Discussion

1. One of the mainstays of hametz is שאור, or sourdough starter to us. Sourdough takes a long process to make and it took a leap of faith for Jews throughout the generations to give up their family starters for Passover. How do you see the significance in the Muslim neighbors bringing over a starter the night Passover ends?
2. Traditionally the seder night is a purely Jewish festival – inviting non-Jews is frowned upon in Rabbinic sources. Does it enhance or detract from the Passover festival to add on a final evening of celebration? How does including those of other religions play into the theme of Pesach?
3. Today, as with many traditions, Mimouna has become commercialized. In Israel it is a night and day of picnics and bar-b-ques with music and good cheer – but little interaction across religions. Is there still a benefit in maintaining the tradition? Is there cultural appropriation?
4. What does the Mimouna teach us about the relations between Muslims and Jews in Morocco?

Suggested Readings

Mimouna Libyan egg bread recipe <https://www.labna.it/en/mimouna-egg-bread.html>

Ben Ami, Issachar. "The Mimouna Festival Among the Moroccan Jews". *The Nomadic Alternative: Modes and Models of Interaction in the African-Asian Deserts and Steppes*, edited by Wolfgang Weissleder, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011, pp. IX-XII. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110810233.IX>

,גאל, יגאל and Yigal Bin-Nun. "On the Earliest Sources of the Mimuna". *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry*, no. 117, Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 2008, pp. 141–66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23432446>.

Recipes <https://www.angelfire.com/pa2/passover/recipes-pesach/mimouna.html>

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