Video Clip: Mimouna

Morocco and select North African Communities

Mimouna is a figurative and literal opening of the doors of the Jews’ homes to the outside world. After a week of remaining closed in with the family, in order to maintain Passover’s strict food laws, Mimouna celebrations are an opportunity to once again engage with neighbors. In Morocco, 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. And it is also the foundation for the Hassidic Messiah Feast held that same evening.

**Topics**

1. Jewish holiday customs (Passover)
2. Jewish diversity
3. Jew/non-Jew relations
4. Hassidic Jewry
5. The importance of tradition/minhag

**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 not universally agreed upon. There are those who say that “Mimouna” stems from the Hebrew word “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 “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. And yet 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 holiday, Jews across the Muslim world secluded themselves from their neighbors. There was a fear that wheat or breadcrumbs might accidentally enter one of their foods or liquids, to the point that they would not even share a glass of water with non-Jews. 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. While keeping a distance 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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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 homes 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 other vegetables and fruits. 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 *mufletta*, 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 fiancé’s home where they would be served *muffleta* and fish. Since this was the traditional season for arranging marriages, young people would go out in the streets under their parents’ watchful gaze. The elderly 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 historically is said to have taken place on the last day of Passover and ended in freedom. Jews living inland would instead go to 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. This 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 Amazigh (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*

*(Tirbakhu u-tsa’adu le’am hada zu kan ana u-le’am zia be’Eretz Yisrael)*

*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 shortened to Tirbakhu u-tsa'adu – May you be blessed 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 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.

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.

*בניסן נגאלו ובניסן עתידין להיגאל*

*(BeNissan nig’alu u-beNissan atidin le-higa’el)*

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

**Questions for Discussion**

1. 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 Muslim neighbors being entrusted to maintain the sourdough starter over the week and to bring it over the night Passover ends?
2. Does it enhance or detract from the Passover festival to add on a final evening of celebration? Is there an issue of בעל תוסיף, the prohibition of adding extra on to a mitzvah? (See Maimonides on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1)
3. How does including those of other religions play into the theme of Passover?
4. 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 in this new context? Can those not of North African descent take part in the celebrations, or even lead them, or is there cultural appropriation?
5. What does Mimouna teach us about the relations between Muslims and Jews in Morocco? How and should we adopt it today? Map out an impactful modern Mimouna ceremony.
6. The Seudat Moshiah, or Messiah Feast, was instituted by the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidic Judaism. The seder begins in the last hours of the last day of Passover and continues into the night. There is a legend that the Ba’al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer 1698-1760) never met the Or HaHaim, (Hayim ibn Attar, c. 1696-1743), a Rabbi originally from Morocco, but he felt an internal connection to him, as illustrated in this anecdote:

The Zohar teaches us that the highest point of Shabbat (and the entire year) is called Ra’ava D’Ra’avin (desire of desires) and it happens for each person after the *Minha* prayer. At that time, the Ba’al Shem Tov washed his hands to eat the holy third meal of Shabbat. He then paused for a few moments and declared “Alas, the great Or HaHaim, the light of the West [Eretz Yisrael] has passed away” [Some say he said “The western lamp”, alluding to the middle candle of the Menorah].

His students were puzzled and asked him how he knew about that. The Ba’al Shem Tov replied “There’s a supremely holy secret about washing the hands that is revealed to only one individual at a generation. This was the Or HaHaim, and now it was revealed to me from Above. That’s how I know.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

What is the connection between the Messiah Feast and the Mimouna? Could there be a spiritual connection across temporal and geographic spaces? Could the two festivals be incorporated? What would be the obstacles?

**Suggested Readings**

*Recipes and culture*

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

Mufletta recipe <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3GQXm5Uukk>

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

Moroccan dance steps <https://youtu.be/H2IfAPtHTZM?si=kFzyBwF3xiABjnrG>

*History*

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pp. 75-87.

<https://www.academia.edu/10108633/The_Mimuna_and_Minority_Status_of_Moroccan_Jews_Ethnology_17_75_87_1978?source=swp_share>

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1. A sourdough base is used in place of yeast to make leavened bread, which is prohibited on Passover. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This version is taken from <https://www.emunabuilders.com/post/the-story-of-the-holy-ohr-hachaim> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)