

Interview with Carol Saal on her visit to Djerba



JIMENA's long time member and dear friend, Carol Saal, traveled with American Associates of Ben Gurion University, to the Tunisian island of Djerba for the Lag b'Omer festival. JIMENA recently interviewed Carol about her experience exploring Jewish life in Tunisia and we are delighted to share her reflections with you.

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Q. What brought you to the island of Djerba?

When I was President of the American Associates of Ben Gurion University, we tried organizing interesting trips to build connections and camaraderie between our supporters and the University. Back in September, the current AABGU President and myself looked at a number of travel destinations. We did a survey and received many great suggestions, but not one person recommended Tunisia. Because of the wonderful Lag b'Omer celebration on the Tunisian island of Djerba, I suggested that this might be a great option. We did some further research and because of timing and unique appeal of the festival, decided this would be a fantastic destination for our group.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Djerba and its significance?

Djerba is an island off the Mediterranean coastline of Tunisia, south of the city of Tunis. For a millennia, the island has been populated by a Jewish community that claims to be direct descendants of the Jews who fled Jerusalem after the First Temple was destroyed in 587 BCE. When the First Temple was destroyed, a group of Jews brought a stone from the temple with them to Djerba, and it is now inside a crypt at the El Ghribah Synagogue. This community has lived side by side with their Tunisian Muslim neighbors for centuries but have remained insular, building their own schools and institutions, most famously the El Ghribah Synagogue.

The El Ghribah Synagogue is the center of a large Lag Baomer pilgrimage and celebration that draws thousands of North African Jews and their descendants each year. People come from France, Israel, Tunisia and from all the other places that North African Jews dispersed to. The Tunisian government doesn't require special visas for travelers and they don't give Israelis a difficult time, so thousands of people come for the celebration.

Q. Did you meet any of the local Djerban Jews? What was that experience like?

Yes. We met Jews in Tunis and in Djerba, and it was very interesting because there is a real contrast between these two groups. My feeling is that the Djerban Jews are very indigenous and rooted in their island. They speak Arabic, not French, they are insular, and many are poor. We visited a Jewish school and in the classroom we visited, the boys were studying Gemarah. The

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school was essentially a Yeshiva, and the headmaster who took us around explained that their community is very religious, and they prefer to stay that way. The Jewish community of Djerba happily welcomed the influx of people to the Lag b'Omer celebration, but I don't think they wanted people sticking around because they want to maintain their level of communal observance and traditional lifestyles.

Q. Tell me a bit about the Lag b'Omer celebration at the El Ghribah Synagogue.

The synagogue was packed, there were people everywhere and it was sort of organized chaos. The synagogue itself was like nothing I'd ever seen. It had these little sections that were railed off and in each section was a local holy man who blessed people. People brought these holy men fig liquor, nuts, raisins, dates and other foods. There was this side room that had mostly women in it. The floor was covered in mats and the women would cover their heads and take off their shoes before entering. After the women entered they would light a candle and then wait in a line in order to kneel at the edge of this crypt where they would place hard boiled eggs. Some of the eggs had messages written on them, and my assumption is that this was some sort of fertility ritual.

Q. Did you feel the spirituality of this place or did you have a different kind of experience?

I didn't personally feel the spirituality of the experience, but I understood that this pilgrimage was something extremely holy to many North African Jews, especially Tunisians. I lit a candle and watched the rituals with curiosity. I could easily imagine that if you lived in Djerba, or went there regularly that you could have these very spiritual experiences.

Q. So what struck you most about the island of Djerba and its Jewish history?

The most fascinating thing for me was that I was completely ignorant of the fact that there were Jews who lived there since the destruction of the First Temple. I had never heard of Jewish communities in North Africa having a continuous presence in the region since the First Temple, so that really amazed me.

We had an archeologist with us and every time we would talk about Djerban Jews, he would roll his eyes at the possibility of a Jewish presence on the island since the fall of the First Temple. Then, the last night of the tour, when we were back in Tunis, the president of Ben Gurion University, Dr. Rivka Carmi, who is a geneticist, gave us a talk which blew us all away. Apparently, genetic research has proven that indigenous Djerban Jews have been there since the destruction of the First Temple. It was very powerful, because throughout the tour a lot of what we were exposed to in Djerba, seemed almost mythical but here was the University President confirming that this insular and relatively isolated Jewish population actually descended directly from Jewish exiles of the First Temple.

Q. Did you feel safe and welcomed by the Tunisian government and the Muslim population?

Absolutely. The most amazing thing about being in Tunisia was the openness of the society as a Muslim country. Tunisia doesn't seem to have been radicalized in any way. The way the women dress and the way religious and secular mix made me feel like this is a tolerant Muslim society. Tunisians embrace their connection to France and they clearly love French culture. They speak French, they have beautiful hotels and restaurants, and they are very proud of their country.

Some Jews have chosen to stay in Tunisia and they live very nice lives. We went to the home of a Jewish family in Carthage, a suburb of Tunis, for Shabbat and spent the evening with them. This was a family that lived openly as Jews and attends a small local synagogue. We also visited the main synagogues in the center of Tunis and I've never seen a larger Magen David (Star of David) on the front of a synagogue in my life. The synagogue was pristine; there was no graffiti and there was less security at this Tunisian synagogue than at some synagogues I've visited in France and other European countries. The synagogues are used regularly for services and ceremonies. We also visited the Jewish cemetery, and again no guards, no graffiti and everything was very well taken care of and properly groomed.

Q. It sounds like Tunisia might have surpassed any expectations you had?

Absolutely. As far as having a Jewish community with active institutions in the middle of a Muslim country, I was incredibly impressed. They do better than Poland and Hungary.

Q. Can I put that on the record?

Yes. It was almost shocking and such a pleasant surprise. One of the things that happened to us was that when we walked into this Jewish cemetery and as the doors opened, the first tomb that we saw had our family name.

Q. Would you recommend Tunisia as a travel destination to your friends?

Yes. I thought Tunis was a wonderful resort destination. Djerba is more isolated and hard to get to, although I'm sure there are many worthy places to visit there as well. There were many very upscale resorts in Tunis, with leading hotels on quiet Mediterranean beaches where the only thing you see are camels and horses. Completely charming and wonderful.

Q. I'm curious if this trip changed your impression of the Arab world?

No, I think Tunisia stands alone. It's a very unique country because of its leaders and the semi-openness of the government. Apparently a lot of women serve in the government and the country remains closely connected to France. They have one foot solidly planted in the Western World and they're unusual and unique compared to many of their neighbors in the Arab world.

Q. So would you go back to Tunisia?

Absolutely. I would go back.

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