

Ancient Jewish community in Tunisia has unsure future

by [Elizabeth Bryant](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue

Brightly colored Hebrew letters are pasted on the walls of a kindergarten in the sun-washed community of Hara Kbira, Tunisia, where toddlers clap and sing Jewish songs. Outside, young mothers push strollers past houses with walls painted with Jewish symbols.

Across North Africa, a once-vibrant Jewish population has all but vanished. Crumbling synagogues and cemeteries serve as fading testaments of a time long ago. Their biggest numbers are in Morocco, where some 2,500 aging Jews remain.

Yet on Tunisia's resort island of Djerba, young families are bucking that trend.

Whether Djerba's 1,000 Jews will endure is a matter for debate. But for many—including Jews from abroad who visit Djerba for a religious festival—the island's community, dating back at least 2,000 years, holds family ties and traditions.

Djerba also remains an oasis of interfaith harmony and tolerance. In some ways it mirrors Tunisia's move toward democracy. Despite serious economic and security problems, the country has emerged as the only success story from the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

"The future of the Jewish community will depend on Tunisia's political and security situation," said René Trabelsi, whose septuagenarian father, Perez, is president of Djerba's Jewish community. "But if it remains and even grows, there must be relations between Israel and Tunisia," which today remain limited.

The younger Trabelsi runs a travel agency outside Paris and is a key liaison between the Djerbian community and the diaspora in France. He is also among the tens of thousands of Jews who left Tunisia following its 1956 independence from France and the outbreak of the larger Arab-Israeli conflict.

A population that once numbered 100,000 now stands at less than 2,000. Most live in the conservative community of Hara Kbira, with smaller pockets elsewhere,

including the capital, Tunis.

“Two things mark the Jews from Djerba,” said Albert-Armand Maarek, a Tunisian-French historian. “One is they were chased from ancient Israel, and that is transmitted through the generations. Second, they’re very insular, island people.”

Many boys attend yeshiva and join the family jewelry business. Women often marry before 20 and stay home to raise families.

“There are girls elsewhere who become lawyers and architects, who get doctoral degrees—here, we can’t,” said 18-year-old Anael Haddad, who teaches math at a Jewish school in Hara Kbir. “But life is also very easy and clear.”

A few miles away in the tangle of streets of Djerba’s main souk, jewelry store owner Mikael Haddouk talks about family members who have emigrated to France and Israel.

“I feel fine here,” he said. “Business is slow, but that’s not a reason to leave Tunisia.”

In some ways, the trend is going the other way, tour operator Trabelsi said. Jews who emigrated to France still return to Djerba for the holidays, a tradition their children are following.

“It’s very important for them to see the country of their origin,” he said.

Djerba has been largely spared the violence occurring elsewhere in Tunisia, which experienced two major terrorist attacks last year. Jews and Muslims live here peacefully, both communities say, sometimes sharing each other’s traditions.

“We each have our own religion and habits, but everything is fine,” said Mourad Mhenni, a Muslim postal worker who lives in Hara Kbir.

Yet no one has forgotten the 2002 attack on Djerba’s El Ghriba synagogue, Africa’s oldest Jewish house of worship, a few miles from Hara Kbir. A suicide truck bombing claimed by al-Qaeda killed 21 people.

Fears of potential militant attacks have shrunk the numbers of those making the annual May pilgrimage to El Ghriba. It once drew thousands of foreigners for the Jewish Arbor Day holiday, Lag B’Omer, which also marks the death of second-

century rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

“We weren’t even sure we would organize a pilgrimage this year,” Trabelsi said, after Islamic State fighters crossed over from Libya to launch an attack on the town of Ben Gardane, about 55 miles away. Dozens of militants were killed in clashes with security forces.

Despite an Israeli warning for citizens to avoid the pilgrimage this year, the event went ahead, under tight security and with helicopters buzzing overhead.

European and Tunisian Jews chatted on long wooden benches inside the synagogue and later danced and ate together outside. Women followed an age-old tradition of writing wishes on hard-boiled eggs and placing them in the grotto, considered the synagogue’s inner sanctuary.

Marc Knobel, a French historian whose mother grew up near Tunis, said he found “great spirituality and culture” in Djerba’s old traditions. He flew there to attend the pilgrimage.

So did Danny Rich, a rabbi and chief executive of a movement called Liberal Judaism in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and parts of Europe.

“The community here faces the same challenges of other small communities, which is one of numbers,” he said. “But there are opportunities to grow, including encouraging more Jews to come. —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on July 5, 2016.*