

THE LAND OF THE LOTUS-EATERS

Michael S. Nussbaum, M.D.

Cincinnati Literary Club

March 15, 2010

Join me for a tale of survival, traditions, and escape that traverses over three millennia and two continents. It involves kings and presidents, sea captains and star freighter pilots, Temple priests, rabbis, and Jedi Knights, time travel, an ancient community on a magical island, and a heroic humanitarian aid organization. All are interwoven in the history of the Jewish inhabitants of North Africa.

We begin with Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus recounts how after coming to the shores of the land of the Lotus-Eaters his men were fed "flowering foods" by the natives, which induced such euphoria that they didn't want to leave -- in fact, they couldn't remember how to get home. Homer writes:

“Thence for nine days I drifted before the deadly blasts along the swarming sea; but on the tenth we touched the land of Lotus-eaters, men who make food of flowers. So here we went ashore and drew us water, and soon by the swift ships my men prepared their dinner. Then after we had tasted food and drink, I sent some sailors forth to go and learn what men who live by bread dwelt in the land, — selecting two, and joining with them a herald as a third. These straightway went and mingled with the Lotus-eaters. These Lotus-eaters had no thought of harm against our men; indeed, they gave them lotus to taste; but whosoever of them ate the lotus' honeyed fruit wished to bring tidings back no more and never to leave the place, but with the Lotus-eaters there desired to stay, to feed on lotus and forget his going home. These men I brought back weeping to the ships by very force, and dragging them under the benches of our hollow ships I bound them fast, and bade my other trusty men to hasten and embark on the swift ships, that none of them might eat the lotus and forget his going home. Quickly they came aboard, took places at the pins, and sitting in order smote the foaming water with their oars.”

Homer, *The Odyssey*

Lotus flowers have been influential in cultures across the world from olden times until today, from ancient Egypt and India to all across Asia. They have been associated with the human soul, gods and goddesses and featured in stories and legends. The meaning of a lotus flower ranges from divine purity and enlightenment, as in Buddhism, wealth, as in Hinduism, to rebirth, as in the ancient Egyptian religion.

Alfred Tennyson elaborated on the scene in the *Odyssey* in his 1832 poem *The Lotos-Eaters*:

*"In the afternoon, they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.
All round the coast the languid air did swoon,
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.”*

Alfred Tennyson, *The Lotos Eaters*

Legend has it that this place was the Island of Meninx, renamed Djerba in the third century A.D. – a Mediterranean island located just off the southeast coast of Tunisia.

In his 1976 film *Star Wars* George Lucas chose the island for the site of the iconic scene in Chalmun's Cantina the bar located in the pirate city of Mos Eisley on the planet of Tatooine. Tatooine is where we first meet Luke Skywalker and was named for the movie's desert location of Tataouine in western Tunisia and Mos Eisley was created in the fishing port city of Ajim, located on none other than Djerba. Mos Eisley was the headquarters for crime lord Jabba the Hutt and the cantina was the favorite haunt of freighter pilots and a host of other seemly characters and criminal transients on the lam. It is where Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi first encounter and hire the services of the two smugglers Han Solo and Chewbacca in order to secure transit off of Tatooine.

In ABC's television series *LOST* the Tunisian desert serves as a destination via a wormhole from the Orchid Station on the island. Time travel theorists explain that a wormhole is a shortcut through the fourth dimension between two locations, connecting two points in time and space.

Although it is hard to find a single lotus there today, Djerba is an enchanting and mystical place where, even in the 21st century, tradition and mythology still survive on this low-lying sandy "island of dreams". At times one feels that they have stepped through a wormhole and have traveled back to an earlier era. The entrancing landscape on this island paradise is filled with centuries-old olive groves, date palms, golden beaches, whitewashed fortress-like architecture and domed mosques, all made brighter by the Mediterranean sun. It is a popular vacation destination for Europeans who flock to Djerba seeking the luxury hotels, where marble lobbies are the backdrop for gentle flowing fountains. Casinos and thalassotherapy centers are clustered along the main tourist strip of Sidi Mahres Beach, on the northeast coast of the island. Thalassotherapy, for those who don't know, involves the use of sun and sea water to treat ailments ranging from arthritis to eczema to depression...perhaps a modern day attempt to achieve the euphoria imparted by the lotus blossoms.

The Djerba that lies away from the big hotels is mainly rural, with wild stretches of beach on its western and southeastern coasts, and flat, open plains in the center. It is joined to the mainland by a dramatic six mile-long Roman causeway originally built in the 6th century B.C. Although the island has been affected by tourism, many traditions have persisted such as time-honored fishing methods which have not changed much since the days of the Phoenicians over 3,000 years ago.

Throughout the Arabic world, the populations of the Jewish communities are diminishing as local repression and the opportunities in Israel and elsewhere attract the younger generation. That is the case everywhere except on the Island of Djerba, the oldest and longest-lived Diaspora Jewish community in the world, where there are over 1,000 Jews and the population is growing by 4% per year. The capital city on the Island is Houmt Suk a pretty town with a working fishing port and a population of about 70,000. Its atmosphere is relaxed, combining the quiet self-confidence that accompanies an ancient

way of life. There are two Jewish Quarters; the main quarter is Hara Kebira where the majority of the Jews live and work while the other quarter, Hara Sghira, has only a few Jewish families remaining. The ancient La Ghriba Synagogue is situated in the latter Hara Sghira and is believed to be the site of the world's oldest synagogue, but more about La Ghriba later.

*“Like a tale of little meaning tho' the words are strong;
Chanted from an ill-used race of men that cleave the soil,
Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,
Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil;”*

Alfred Tennyson, The Lotos Eaters

It is fitting that on this mythical island of the lotus eaters, Djerba is a center of Jewish spiritualism, a throwback to ancient practices, one of the few places in the world where scribes still hand print the Torah scrolls on parchment, community elders regularly chant the words of the *Zohar*, Judaism's book of mysticism, and old women spend their days inspecting wheat grain by grain for impurities and guard the wheat year-round in the ancient traditional manufacture of the *shmurah* or guarded matzo for Passover which is exported to Jewish communities worldwide.

Hara Kebira is compact and dusty, filled by a labyrinth of narrow dirt-paved streets lined by white, square houses with doors and window shutters painted light blue. The blue depicts water in order to keep away evil spirits who, it is firmly believed, cannot swim and thus will not enter the homes via these cerulean portals. Compact cars and pattering motor bikes skitter around close corners, competing with pedestrians and cart-drawing donkeys for precious space on the road. The neighborhood used to be exclusively Jewish but is now mixed with Jews and Arabs living and working side by side. The houses have the same domes and keyhole-shaped doorways as Arab houses, the same white walls with blue trim, and even the same good-luck symbols -- hands and fish painted on the outside walls, which originated with the Carthaginians, who predate both Jew and Arab on the island. Families live in compounds; a new bedroom is built for each child who marries. There are kosher butchers, a yeshiva, a boy's and girl's school, kindergartens and an old-age home, all supported by the Jews of Djerba. Most of the Djerban Jews still make their livelihoods as they have for centuries, working as carpenters or butchers, dealing in commerce, printing, textile weaving, metalworking and jewelry-making, maintaining strict and spiritual Jewish practices that date back to the time of King Solomon's Temple.

In the ancient Middle East, King Solomon built Israel and its twelve tribes into a prosperous nation becoming a major trade and military power. The nomadic population of approximately 800,000 Israelites had settled down to become farmers and city dwellers. In order to create a permanent setting for the Ark of the Covenant, Solomon built the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem. He employed and enslaved over 30,000 craftsmen, artisans, and workers in order to complete this feat. However, this effort drove the kingdom to the verge of bankruptcy and when Solomon died in 928 B.C. the seeds of rebellion were ripe. Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam whose reign was characterized by cruelty and arrogance. The ten tribes occupying the northern region

refused to follow the son choosing to follow Jeroboam son of Nebat and broke away from the kingdom, forming Israel while the two remaining tribes of Benjamin and Judah continued to occupy Judah in the south, including the city of Jerusalem. From then on, Israel and Judah remained separate rival nations, each with their own king. Israel followed pagan ways. Jeroboam placed golden calves in the towns of Bethel and Dan in the hopes of getting people to worship without going to the Temple in Jerusalem. He dismissed the priestly tribe of Levi and appointed his own priests. This caused many Levites to defect to Jerusalem.

In 722 B.C., Israel in the north was overrun by Assyria; the ten tribes were deported and dispersed, never to be heard from again. The smaller state of Judah lasted until 586 B.C. when, as prophesized by Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylonia destroyed Jerusalem and the great Temple. The majority of the citizens were exiled to Babylonia or Egypt where they thrived, keeping their faith and culture alive for the next 70 years. In 539 B.C., Cyrus, the king of Persia conquered Babylonia and encouraged the exiled Israelites to return to Judah and Jerusalem. About 40,000 returned over the next twenty years and set about rebuilding their devastated land and the Second Temple, which was completed in 515 B.C.

Not all of the Israelites were exiled to Babylonia. The Judean peasants, the poorest citizens remained behind to fend for themselves in the occupied land while a group of the Levite priests, or *kohanim* refused to be occupied or to become assimilated into Babylonian or Egyptian society. They chose to leave the Babylonia sphere and sought out allies or more precisely, enemies of the Babylonians. The Phoenicians were also at war with Babylonia and the Phoenician city of Tyre had fallen to Nebuchadnezzar in 573 B.C. after a 13-year resistance and the entire Phoenician homeland was also subject to Babylonian rule. Carthage became the heir to this great culture and Punic Carthage was the destination for the exiled *kohanim*. They went to Carthage in North Africa, bringing their beliefs and culture along with, as legend has it, stones from the altar of the destroyed Temple. They settled on the Carthaginian Mediterranean Island of Meninx, now Djerba and built a community there that has continued into the present time.

*“Let us alone. What is it that will last?
All things are taken from us, and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.”*

Alfred Tennyson, The Lotus Eaters

When Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem after their years of Babylonian captivity, the majority of the emigrants in North Africa chose to return except those on Djerba. Historians suggest that doubtlessly these Jews had eaten the famous lotus and were entranced by the powers of the island. The Rabbis explain that these descendants of the Temple priests refused to return before the arrival of the Messiah. Only then would they be guaranteed that the Temple would never again be destroyed. As a case in point these rabbinical scholars refer to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. which had been built without waiting for the Messiah's arrival. Once again, following the destruction of the second Temple, another group of priests fled to Djerba

and the protection of their ally and Rome's enemy, Carthage. A final influx of Jews to Tunisia and Djerba occurred during the Spanish Inquisition when Iberian Jews sought refuge in Ottoman Tunisia, where they were welcomed and protected. Much of the Sephardic influence seen in today's Jewish life on Djerba originated from this emigration.

La Ghriba Synagogue in Hara Sghira is a house of worship which is shrouded in several myths and legends, including the claim that it sits at the site of the world's oldest synagogue, dating back to 586 B.C. Physical evidence of this is said to exist in the form of stones from the altar of the destroyed First Temple brought to Djerba by the refugees and buried beneath the synagogue. Another legend claims the stones fell from heaven and a mysterious woman directed construction of the house of worship on top of the stones 25 centuries ago. Perhaps this is another example of a wormhole to Tunisia. The stones rest in a grotto in the foundation of the building. One enters this dark space by crawling on hands and knees through a narrow passageway adjacent to the Ark that holds the Torah scrolls. Many customs and myths are associated with these stones. One is for women to leave eggs with the name of an unmarried girl written on them near the stones. The tropical heat cooks the egg, which is then returned to the girl, who after eating it is sure to find a husband. Women who are unable to bear children are instructed to crawl down and touch the stones which will make them fertile. If it works, this is certainly more cost effective than *in vitro* fertilization.

Like most of the structures in Djerba, the exterior of La Ghriba has bright white walls punctuated by azure shutters and doors that match the Mediterranean sky. The present structure was built in the late 19th century, with additions made during more recent years. One enters barefoot as in a mosque and with heads covered. Inside, the sanctuary is a cool oasis, with high ornate arches and its color palette includes vibrant aquatic blue, ochre, and gold colored tiles illuminated by natural light and radiant metal chandeliers. The elevated pulpit in the center is draped with silk scarves placed there by female congregants. The ark against the far wall houses what is believed to be one of the world's oldest Torah scrolls.

Every year, on the 33rd day following the Passover observance, La Ghriba is the site of an annual Lag B'Omer holiday pilgrimage which draws Jews from all of North Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the world. Doors around the inner courtyard lead to rooms which accommodate some of the thousands of Jews who are drawn to Djerba for the festivities. This 400-year tradition venerates Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoshai a Talmudic scholar and one of the authors of the *Kabbalah*, the Jewish book of mysticism. The festival involves a joyous parade through the streets with the Torah scrolls held aloft and a man dressed as a menorah covered in silk scarves dances in the streets; there is much song and drinking of the potent fig liqueur Boukha, and many participate in rituals involving the mystical stones from Solomon's Temple.

Archaeologists have offered to analyze the Ghriba stones to once and for all prove their age and origin. However, the Djerban Jewish elders have declined, preferring to continue to perpetuate the legend rather than risking its repudiation. Historians and religious

leaders have debated the origins of the Djerban Jewish community for centuries and one can find evidence that support a variety of hypotheses depending upon your perspective. The presence of Jewish colonies in North Africa contemporary with Punic and Roman Carthage is certain and is based on the discovery of a Jewish graveyard from that era in Gammarth, Tunisia. The existence of Hebrew speaking Jewish communities in North Africa substantiates the theory that they left Israel before Hebrew was supplanted by Aramaic during the Second Temple period. Written documents supporting the ancient claims of the Djerbans have yet to appear and there is no physical proof that Jews settled in Djerba in 586 B.C. The presence of a few Jews in Tunisia before the fall of the Second Temple is very plausible since there are ancient citations mentioning Jews being scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin. A group surely came to Tunisia when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple.

A portion of Tunisian Jewry is probably descended from Berbers- Tunisia's oldest inhabitants, who converted to Judaism in the 6th and 7th centuries A.D. during the Byzantine Period in Tunisia. At that time, Jews from towns like Carthage which is present day Tunis, fled from Byzantine religious repression to out-of-the-way, mountainous Berber areas and oases, then eventually took refuge on Djerba. Historians believe that the presence of the solitary sanctuary, La Ghriba provides a further argument in favor of the more ancient claims of the community. Further, some scholars point out that there are several usages in the Djerban Jewish religious rituals that are contrary to the Talmud, which would seem to prove that the faction of the Jews of Djerba predated the construction of the Second Temple and the Talmudic period. The Djerban Jews prefer this explanation and their father's legends to any of the historians' contrary claims. The idea of descending from priests of the First Temple suits the current Djerbans just fine.

The Jewish community of Djerba provides a Jewish education system to instruct its youngsters in a time-honored fashion. The boys enroll in the *yeshiva* and the boy's school, and the girls attend the girl's school. One of the differences between Djerba and other communities in Tunisia is that few, if any of the students choose to go on to sit for their baccalaureate, the equivalent to a high school diploma. With the baccalaureate in hand, students will usually choose to attend university in France and they rarely return to Tunisia after matriculating. By this means, the Jewish communities in urban areas such as Tunis are rapidly declining. In Djerba, after the ninth grade or about age 15 the boys usually join their fathers in their trade and the girls either teach in the kindergarten or the girl's school or return to the home where they help their mothers until they are married. Once married, the women do not work outside the home. They are expected to maintain a proper spiritual home for the family which is usually large. While marriages in Djerba are not arranged, per se, they certainly do not reflect usual American or Western trends leading up to marriage. Once a man becomes financially capable of supporting a family he decides who he wants to marry and his parents visit the parents of the potential bride. The groom's parents discuss the groom's intention and if the families get along and the bride's parents are happy with the suitor, the girl is then consulted for approval. The average age for a bride in Djerba is between 16 and 22, and she usually does not turn down the offer. It is rare for a Djerban girl to leave the community and marry outside of the Island. There is a strict separation of girls and boys in school as well as in the social

sphere and the girl never truly meets the groom before the marriage is arranged. Once betrothed, a man and woman cannot meet. However, in this intimate community, the girls and boys certainly know all about each other but are not supposed to engage with one another in any capacity until they are married. Nonetheless, in this electronic age, some couples apparently speak and text each other clandestinely by cell phone.

In preparation for the wedding it is customary for the families to paint blue candelabras or *menorot* and fish (both signs of good luck for protection) on the sides of the houses of the bride and groom. Another traditional custom in North Africa, not only for Jews but also for Muslims is for the families and friends to gather for the ritual painting of the hands with henna to celebrate the upcoming nuptial. The wedding takes place either in the communal wedding hall or outdoors during the week followed by a feast of olives, hummus, couscous, grilled chicken and fish, dates, wine, beer, whiskey, and fig liqueur. On the subsequent day the families go to La Ghriba, dressed in traditional Tunisian garb—brightly colored dresses, accessories, and headdresses adorned with gold sequins and beads—where they take photographs, they pray at the ancient house of worship, and they avail upon the Ghriba stones for their magic powers of fertility.

After the wedding period is over, the couple usually begins a family, and the wife stays at home to take care of the house and children, while the husband works. The women frequently prepare meals for the family, the congregation of their *shul*, and the community but they do not take part in any of the festivities. They remain in the background, eating by themselves or with their daughters and the other women in the kitchens while the men serve the meals and share in the delicacies and camaraderie. This restrictive lifestyle for Djerban Jewish women, interestingly enough, is much more extreme than the roles and way of life of their Tunisian Muslim counterparts.

*“In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.”*

Alfred Tennyson, The Lotos Eaters

Djerba has always served as a place of refuge, not just for Jews, but for Berbers, Christians, and a variety of unorthodox Islamic sects. Djerba's varied ethnic mix has created a laid-back tolerance that is the envy of the rest of the world. Muslim and Jew live side by side, where the children play together in the streets, *mezuzahs* are prominently fixed to doorways, and the magnificent La Ghriba synagogue stands not far from Islamic mosques and is guarded around the clock by Tunisian military. People are seen going about in all manner of dress from modern to traditional from a time long past, cackling fluidly and interchangeably in French, Arabic, and Hebrew. Contact with the secular west has begun to influence the younger generation's dress and observances; all of the teens wear blue jeans and carry cell phones. However, in their religious practices, the Djerban Jewish community is truly a living museum to the Judaism of their ancestors.

Religious life in Djerba is, as it has been for over two millennia, traditional, devoted and serious. For the life of the Djerban Jew, the present is the past preserved, today is an epilogue to his ancestor's mythology. By strictly following the religious path of their

ancestors, the Jewish Community of Djerba has become a human island protected by religious ramparts. Djerba's Judaism is unique in habits not doctrine. On any given Friday afternoon in Hara Kebira you will find an entire community busy preparing for the Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Men, women, and children are scurrying about with excited anticipation. Hara Kebira is the home to the region's supply of kosher food as almost all of Tunisian Jews keep kosher. The yeshiva is supported by a tax on kosher meat. There are five kosher butchers that work in the town, slaughtering chickens two times a week. The chickens are brought into town from the rural farms on donkey carts and you may see the butchers standing in the street in dark clothing and blood-speckled leather aprons that drape down below their knees. They carefully inspect the live chickens for imperfections then, if the birds pass this scrutiny, the butcher performs the ritual slaughter on the spot in the traditional manner with their razor sharp knives right before your eyes. At sundown, the rabbi will blow the *shofar*, the traditional ram's horn to signify the beginning of Shabbat and to call all to worship.

There are eleven active synagogues in Djerba, and most fill every Shabbat and on holidays with men whose shoulders are draped in white and black prayer shawls and skull caps adorn their heads. They pray in thick Sephardic Hebrew. The strong Sephardic influence originated from the time of the Spanish Inquisition when Jewish refugees from Spain were given sanctuary by Ottoman North Africa. The synagogues are ornate structures, full of stained glass and towering archways, plastered with intricate turquoise tile. Only one of the houses of worship, the Trabelsi synagogue has a place for women to pray. At the others, the women wait outside or in an adjacent courtyard and do not participate in the services. In contrast to this segregation however, the girl's school fills with about 85 girls and young women for prayer every Shabbat. Their joyful singing resonates down the narrow streets and alleys that surround the school conveying the amazing spirit that is felt in this vibrant ancient Jewish community and, channeling Tennyson:

*"But they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song
Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong,"*

Alfred Tennyson, The Lotus Eaters

Rabbi Chaim Bittan, the Grand Rabbi of Tunisia and a Djerban native is a diminutive elfin-like man of no more than five feet tall with a long, salt and pepper beard covering much of his gaunt, dour face. He is devoutly dedicated to his constituents and while he worries a great deal about the fate of the rapidly declining Jewish community in the rest of the country he is clearly proud of the Djerban Jewish tradition and strength. "The Jews of Djerba do not feel that they are better than the rest of the world's Jews," he explains in Hebrew, "they are just more consistent. In other cities, there are people who practice, and people who don't. Here, everyone practices...it is a way of life and Djerbans are dedicated to their religion and follow Jewish traditions in a method that dates back to the time of the First Temple." When asked what Djerba's place is in a country of 7.5 million Muslims, the rabbi describes the community as, "integrated not assimilated."

*“Let us alone. What pleasure can we have
To war with evil? Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?
All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence—ripen, fall, and cease”*

Alfred Tennyson, The Lotus Eaters

The history of the Jews of Tunisia and Djerba includes several serious persecutions. During the Byzantine period, Emperor Justinian excluded Jews from public life, prohibited their practice and ordered synagogues to become churches. Many Tunisian Jews fled into the mountains and the desert, joining secluded Berber communities there, and most remained there even after the Arabs conquered Tunisia in the 7th century, allowing Jews to practice again. Jews lived openly in Tunisia, albeit as second-class citizens, until they were chased inland once again during the Spanish invasions of the 16th century. The Jewish community returned to the coast under Ottoman rule and thrived under French rule until 1940, when Vichy France subjected them to anti-Semitic laws. In 1942 Nazis overran Tunisia, deported a portion of the Jewish population to labor camps and seized all of their property. Djerba, unlike Tunis, was spared the Holocaust because its elders handed over the synagogue's gold to ransom the girls that the Nazis were rounding up as they prepared to flee the Allied Advance.

The Tunisian Jewish community rebuilt itself through a decade of Allied rule until the country achieved independence in 1956. The Jewish population was at its highest at about 125,000 in the 1940s after World War II, but a decline followed the establishment of the State of Israel and fell again when fears that Tunisian independence from France would threaten the peaceful coexistence of Jews and Arabs. The new repressive Muslim government eliminated the Jewish Rabbinical Tribunal and Jewish Community Councils and destroyed the Jewish quarter of Tunis. The population was further reduced in response to the 1967 Six-Day War when Muslims laid waste to the Great Synagogue of Tunis. Much of the Jewish population fled to Israel throughout the 1970's and '80's, leaving a dedicated community of about 2,000 Jews living in Tunisia, with about 1,000 of those residing on the island of Djerba. Recently, the tide has turned and Djerba's Jewish population has grown as young people have stayed, producing families with many offspring.

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has served as the President of Tunisia since 1987. Previously a military figure, then serving briefly as Prime Minister, he took power from President Habib Bourguiba by a bloodless coup. He leads an authoritarian regime in the guise of a procedural democracy. Although an Islamic country, the Tunisian government is secular and currently is both tolerant and supportive of its small Jewish community. In October 2009, Ben Ali ran and was “re-elected” with an overwhelming majority of the votes in a supposed free election and the Jews of Tunisia rejoiced. Under Ben Ali, the Tunisian government watches the Jewish community closely but does not restrict Jewish practices. The government appoints a committee which heads the community and manages most of its non-religious functions. To the Tunisian government and President Ben Ali, the coexistence of the Jewish and Muslim communities is a rare sign of peace and tolerance

in an Arab country and is an important image for him to portray to the free world. Government officials are dedicated to preserving this real, but tenuous reputation. In 2002, an Al Qaeda sponsored terrorist bombing outside La Ghriba synagogue killed 21 people and temporarily deterred visitors. Government efforts and increased security at the historic synagogue and in the Jewish communities have fostered the return of tourism. The number of tourists is on the rise again, with the synagogue attracting about 5,000 visitors per year. However, the safety of the Tunisian Jewish Community is totally dependent upon the whims of the President and the Tunisian government. At the age of 74, it is uncertain how long Ben Ali will remain as president and the fate of Tunisia's Jews will depend upon the policies and beneficence of the next leader.

Much like the ancient lotus eaters one is drawn to Djerba by the vitality of the community. How does a small Jewish community situated in the middle of Arabic North Africa or elsewhere in the world survive and prosper? The answer is they need help. In 1914, in response to the needs of millions of Jews in Eastern Europe and Palestine who faced starvation in the chaotic wake of the First World War, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was established. The JDC or simply the "Joint" is a worldwide Jewish relief organization working to preserve and enhance the vitality of Jewish community life around the world.

With the rise of Hitler's Nazi regime, the JDC supported heroic efforts that enabled hundreds of thousands of Jews to escape to Allied territory and Palestine throughout the length of the war. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and on through to the establishment of the state of Israel, the JDC provided critical support as thousands of displaced persons made the difficult transition from refugee status to citizenship in the fledgling state. When the threat of anti-Semitism jeopardized the survival of Ethiopian Jews in the latter part of the 20th century, the Joint played a central role in "Operation Solomon", which airlifted more than 14,000 Jews to Israel in just 36 hours.

The JDC is the largest and most critical channel of humanitarian aid from the North American Jewish community to at-risk Jews overseas. These include the small but vital populations of impoverished Jews living in the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa as well as in Israel. The JDC provides a lifeline of food, medicine, home care, and other critical assistance to elderly Jews and children in need. They provide for the maintenance of essential social services and ensure a Jewish future for their youth

The JDC's focus is not limited to the humanitarian needs of Jews alone. In the spirit of *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew phrase referring to the moral responsibility to repair the world and alleviate suffering, the Joint regularly devotes resources and expertise to humanitarian crises both natural and manmade providing well over \$20 million in non-sectarian disaster relief and development assistance to non-Jewish communities in the last few years alone. Most recently, the JDC was one of the first organizations to respond on the ground to the devastating earthquakes in both Haiti and Chile. These and other contemporary JDC efforts continue a legacy of ambitious, innovative, boldly realized humanitarian action.

Historically, when laws have failed or been ignored, or when the liberties of Jewish citizens have been undermined by a government's failure to protect them, Jewish tradition and identity have suffered. Wherever Jewish lives are under imminent threat due to poverty, persecution, natural disaster, or war, the Joint responds through an array of social and community assistance programs that relieve suffering and foster long-term development and self-sustainability. The JDC works to ensure that Jewish communities—however small or remote—have the opportunity to live in keeping with their cultural traditions.

In Tunisia the JDC partners with the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity in their programs providing much needed medical supplies and aid for impoverished Tunisians. In exchange for working with them on these projects the government allows the JDC to work with the Jewish Communities and they provide protection to the communities and to the visiting delegations. One such projects that is a combined effort of the JDC and the Tunisian Union is the Houmt Souk Day Center and Therapeutic Farm. This is a non-sectarian international development effort which is a day school and working farm for mentally challenged children and young adults. In a country that places very little value on the lives of people who are mentally or developmentally handicapped, this Center provides a glimmer of hope and sunshine for these unfortunate individuals and their families.

Since the JDC's founding, the number of people aided by the organization has reached into the millions. While the full extent of the organization's historic and contemporary impact is nearly impossible to measure, there can be no doubt that the "Joint"—under the banner of "Rescue, Relief, Renewal, and Israel"—has assumed a leading role in the preservation of Jewish life and culture worldwide.

The Djerban Jewish community continues to thrive and grow in no small way because of the assistance received through the work of the JDC. This ancient enclave remains vital, strong, and self-sustaining. Although isolated on a small island in the Mediterranean, they remain connected to all other Jewish communities through their traditions and values. As we reach the end of my tale of this wondrous land I leave you with Tennyson's words which resonate with the heritage of the Jews of Djerba.

*"Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labor in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more."*

Alfred Tennyson, The Lotus Eaters

REFERENCES

1. Avi-Yonah M ed., A History of Israel and the Holy Land, Continuum, 2001
2. Homer, The Odyssey, Translated by George Herbert Palmer, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1923.
3. Chouraqui A, Between East and West: A History of the Jews of North Africa, Varda Books, 2002.
4. Lachmann, R, Jewish Cantillation and Song in the Isle of Djerba, Archives of Oriental Music, Hebrew University, 1940.
5. Rogers RW, A History of Babylonia and Assyria, 3rd Ed., Lost Arts Media, 2003.
6. Rogerson B, A Traveller's History of North Africa, Interlink Books, 1998.
7. Scheindlin RP, A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood, Oxford University Press, 2000.
8. Slouschz N, Travels in North Africa, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1927.
9. Tanakh, A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text, The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.
10. Tennyson A, *The Lotus Eaters*, in: Eliot CW ed., English Poetry III: From Tennyson to Whitman Vol. XLII. The Harvard Classics, P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/42/.