

Article

Selkea! Memories of Eating Non-Kosher Food among the Spanish–Moroccan Jewish Diaspora in Israel

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Abstract: Drawing on life-story interviews and ethnography conducted in Israel from 2009 to 2023, this article examines how members of the Spanish-speaking Moroccan–Jewish diaspora in Israel recalled their habits of eating non-kosher food in Morocco. We explore how these memories emerged in response to commonplace discourses that depict Moroccan Jews as a distinctly religious-traditional ethnic group, untouched by European secular influences, and dichotomous to modern secular cultures in Israel. Contrary to this image, members of the community whom we interviewed highlighted a Jewish Moroccan life that was deeply connected to Spanish colonialism and the broader Hispanic and Sephardi worlds. We focus specifically on the concept of *selkea*, a Haketia (Judeo-Spanish) term meaning to let something go, make an exception, or turn a blind eye. Our analysis of our participants' memories provides a nuanced understanding of Jewish religiosity in the context of colonialism and of how Mizrahi–Sephardi immigrants in Israel reclaimed their Judaism. Highlighting the practice of eating non-kosher food is thus a strategy used to challenge dominant notions of rigid religious commitment within the Sephardi diaspora and their interpretation in Israel.

Keywords: food studies; narrative analysis; Sephardi modernity; Mizrahi traditions; Spanish colonialism; migration; memory



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1. Introduction

“On Saturdays [Shabbat], when the men came out of the *tefilah*,¹ they would have the *aperitivo*² at the bar before coming home”³

The habit of Jewish men in Morocco of visiting a bar to “have an *aperitivo*” on their way home from synagogue was recounted in an interview conducted in Israel in 2014 with Esther, who emigrated from Tetouan to Israel in the 1970s. At first glance, it recalls a casual memory of the men going out for an *aperitivo*, which may appear to be an ordinary daily activity. The memory of this practice, however, implies that a much more complex tapestry of cultural negotiations took place among Jews in the former Spanish protectorate (1912–1956) and in the international zone of Tangier (1924–1956) in Morocco. According to Jewish religious law (*Halakha*), having an *aperitivo* in a bar on Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest is a transgression of Jewish religious law. The main reason that the purchase of food is prohibited on Shabbat is to uphold the sanctity of the day by refraining from activities that involve commercial transactions, thus ensuring that everyone receives a day of rest. In addition, this seemingly ordinary act may involve another violation of *halakha*, Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*). Bars in northern Morocco, and clearly those that operate on Shabbat, were non-kosher according to Halakhic conventions. In such bars, one could find ham, prawns, squid, snails, and lobster, in addition to dishes prepared with the meat of animals that had not been slaughtered, according to *halakha*.

The practice of going to the bar for an *aperitivo*, however, was described in various interviews we conducted in Israel as well as in Argentina, Venezuela, and Spain. For example, Alberto, who migrated from Tangier to Israel in the late 1980s, mentioned how he customarily would go to a bar right after the morning Shabbat prayers. To minimize his violation of the prohibition on handling money on the day of the rest, before Shabbat began, he would put the exact amount of money needed to buy an *aperitivo* in his pocket. Another example appears in an interview with José, who migrated from Larache to Spain in 1984. He remembered that “the typical *aperitivo* after *tefilah* was your beer and your *gambas* (shrimp) [...] But we all ate kosher, or 95% of us ate kosher”. Eating *gambas* was an *exception* to a norm they otherwise observed, as his narrative continued, and people related to it as a behavior akin to mischief, which explains why some of our interviewees laughed and giggled when they recounted this and other such transgressions. Our participants’ humorous accounts of these transgressions release the tension of prohibition and a taboo (Freud 1905). The interviewees’ ability to “misbehave”, to accept religious flexibility and contradictions in a framework of observance and loyalty to the community, is at the core of the experience of modernity that we analyze in this study.

This notion of self-regulation is encapsulated by the Haketia (North African Judeo-Spanish language) word *selkear*. Derived from Moroccan Arabic, the word *selkear* can be roughly translated as “to let it be”, to let go of conflict, and it is commonly used in the imperative form—e.g., *wa selkea!*—which means something like “let it be!” or “don’t hold on to it!” The Spanish–Moroccan Jewish writer Esther Benahan defined *selkear* as “to leave behind confrontation, to forgive, not to give importance to an affront. It’s to look at the Mediterranean and understand what really matters. It’s not cowardice, nor indifference. It’s respect” (Bendahan 2016). Bendahan’s definition of *selkear* emphasizes making space for otherness and responding to European modernization without dividing the community while allowing for the preservation of diverse loyalties.

As part of the culture of *selkear*, these recounted memories about eating non-kosher need to be understood against the complex diasporic contexts in which they emerged: first, the cultural proximity between Spanish colonialism and the Sephardi diaspora in colonial Morocco, and second, in the specific case we explore in this work—the reinterpretation of that pre-migration context in Israel.

We will begin with the first aspect. In 1912, the Treaty of Fes established the French protectorate in Morocco, which ceded to France control over the country’s central and southern regions, including major cities like Casablanca and Rabat. Concurrently, the *treaty between France and Spain regarding Morocco* created the Spanish protectorate in the country’s northern areas, such as Tetouan and the Rif Mountain, and in parts of its southwest. While the French protectorate invested in extensive infrastructural and educational development, the Spaniards, in contrast, had limited resources available to invest in Morocco (Campoy-Cubillo 2012). Thus, the Spanish protectorate was geographically fragmented and less developed, and the Spanish faced significant resistance from the local Amazigh tribes, particularly during the Rif War (1921–1926). Subsequent Spanish efforts to “pacify” Morocco’s rural areas, over which Spain had little to no control, consumed human and material resources for which Spain had not planned (Wyrzten 2015; Pennell 1986). Furthermore, the establishment of the Tangier International Zone in late 1924 added a layer of complexity, as this neutral area was governed by multiple European powers, a strategy that prevented any single nation from dominating the zone. The very mission of the Spanish colonial enterprise in Morocco was thus justified on the grounds of the cultural affinity and historical roots that the Spanish shared with both the Muslims and the Jews of Morocco (Mateo Dieste 2003; Ojeda-Mata 2017).

In this context, Jewish inhabitants in the Spanish protectorate worked to shape their ethnic boundaries vis-à-vis Spanish colonialism in a process that was intertwined with their awareness of being descendants of Spain. Their native Judeo-Spanish heritage made their daily interactions with Spaniards and their connection to the Hispanophone world stronger, helping them distinguish themselves from other non-Spanish-speaking communities. This

interaction also led to a reaffirmation of their Jewish Sephardi identities, reinforced by practices like marriage and dietary laws that maintained community boundaries. Over time, these experiences of being a separate Judeo-Spanish community contributed to a genuine Hispanic Jewish identity nurtured by a global network committed to preserving their pre-1492 Iberian Jewish heritage (Moreno 2024).

To further understand the migrants' references to *selkear*, the second layer of the community's diasporic identity merits discussion; that is their community formation in Israel. By the early 1970s, about 80% of Moroccan Jewry had immigrated to Israel. Upon arrival in their new country, Moroccan Jews—both from the north and the south of the country—often faced significant discrimination and were stereotyped as “backwards” by the predominantly European Ashkenazi Jewish elites in Israel at the time. This marginalization led to a deep identity crisis and the eventual birth of resistance movements, notably the establishment in 1971 of the Israeli Black Panthers to combat the economic, political and cultural marginalization of Moroccan immigrants in this country (Tsur 2008; Chetrit 2010). Over time, Moroccan Jews asserted their cultural identity, ultimately contributing immensely to Israel's diverse cultural tapestry and fostering a strong sense of community, especially in the so-called “development towns” and peripheral neighborhoods where many of the migrants ultimately settled. These contributions included Moroccan music and culinary traditions, intellectual writings on Moroccan–Jewish history and culture, and Moroccan–Jewish religious figures and habits, among others (Schroeter 2016; Bilu 2021; Sa'ada-Ofir 2009; Levy 2018).

Both in Israel and Morocco, there were religious components to the self-image and social representations of the different social groups. In the Israeli context, the consumption of non-kosher meat, particularly pork, and shrimp, is deemed a performative act of transgressing on the religious laws, of being “secular” (*hiloni*), just as keeping kosher is deemed a performance of being “religious” (*dati*) or, in a more nuanced sense, *masorti* (“traditional”) (Yadgar 2015; Abensour 2023). Moroccans in Israel were broadly categorized based on those terms. An examination of how Spanish-speaking Moroccan Jews in Israel recalled their past habits of eating non-kosher food contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities that commonplace dichotomies—such as religious and secular or traditional and modern—tend to obscure.

Our research reevaluates what some scholars have deemed as “moderate” and “open” responses of Sephardi rabbis and communities to modernity (see, for example, Zohar 2013). According to other academic accounts, Sephardi moderation and openness were due to the fact that Sephardi communities did not undergo a “complete” process of modernization. From this perspective, the flexibility of North African Jews is attributed to their limited engagement with the full spectrum of modernity's challenges, particularly those associated with secularism and anti-traditionalist ideologies (Brown 2001). Consequently, it is argued that their adaptability stemmed from the absence of significant ideological or cultural stakes typically associated with the modernization process.⁴ A related view suggests that Sephardi-Mizrahi rabbis were more open to change but were also spiritually vulnerable, which would have led them to tolerate external influences. This openness is seen as accommodating European modernity or coping with Western-colonial values at the cost of weakening Jewish identities and increasing the risk of assimilation (see Katz 2021; Haruvi 2021). This perspective, often contrasted with the portrayal of Ashkenazi orthodoxy as a more rigid force, fails to recognize the complex and strategic ways in which Sephardim navigated modernity, resisting simplistic comparisons with their European counterparts. We, instead, examine how Spanish–Moroccan Jews navigated the ambiguities and contradictions between the different social worlds they inhabited, an attitude encapsulated in the concept of *selkear*. In doing so, we broaden the Israeli concept of *masortiyut*, translated by Yaacov Yadgar as “traditionism”, which involves a dialogical, self-reflective approach to tradition marked by selective practice (Buzaglo 2008; Yadgar 2015).

2. Methodology

Through life-story interviews and ethnographic work, this article delves into the memories recounted by first-generation migrants who spent their childhood and teenage years in colonial Morocco.⁵ The interviewees mentioned in this article include 18 immigrants from northern Morocco to Israel, two to Argentina, and one to Spain. We have also relied on personal documents such as family photo albums and community newspapers. The interviews conducted in Israel included eight individual interviews: one with a group of four cousins, two with married couples who requested joint interviews, and one with two sisters. The interviews conducted in Argentina and Spain were all individual.

The first interview cited in this work was conducted in 2009, and the last one in 2023. The interviews utilized in this study are drawn from two distinct archives: Cohen's and Moreno's. These archives consist of interviews with Spanish–Moroccan Jews in Israel, Argentina, Spain, and Venezuela, which we each began collecting independently during the fieldwork for our respective PhD dissertations (Moreno 2014; Cohen 2017). The interviews conducted after 2021 are part of a shared archive created by both authors. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with real names replaced by pseudonyms, except where interviewees specifically requested the use of their actual names. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 65 to 89 at the time of the interviews. Most of our participants were young adults when they emigrated to Israel. Only one of them was a minor (13 years old), and five were older adults, most of whom were already married and had children of their own by the time they arrived in Israel. Most interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes across various locations in Israel. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, the interviewees' mother tongue, although some participants occasionally switched between Spanish and Hebrew.

Many interviewees greeted us with either sweets and pastries they had prepared for the occasion of the interview—such as flan, *almendraditos*, cookies, and *bizcocho*—or with a full meal, typically featuring traditional Spanish–Moroccan Jewish dishes like *pescado cocho*, orange salad, and a variety of small salads familiar from our own family backgrounds. Both of us come from Spanish–Moroccan families, which made participants proud that *de los nuestros*—“one of us” in Spanish—was contributing to academic research on the community. Many interviewees knew our parents or grandparents or had heard of us through mutual acquaintances, creating a pre-existing sense of familiarity. While some participants saw us more clearly as “insiders”, others perceived us as outsiders from a different generation or cultural background. The question of our insider or outsider status remained ambiguous and conflicted for us (see Narayan 1993), although a detailed discussion of this ambivalence is beyond the scope of this article.

This research situates itself at the intersection of ethnography and personal narrative (see Krizek 2003). We met participants in their everyday settings, primarily at their homes, and engaged in informal conversations before and after the interviews. The interviews resembled conversations more than formal question-and-answer sessions (see Stage and Mattson 2012). The average interview lasted four hours, with the longest being eight and a half hours and the shortest three hours. Beyond the interviews, we frequently met participants' families and were invited to Shabbat meals and events. We established enduring relationships, with many participants sharing family photos, personal notebooks, autobiographies, and memorabilia. In many cases, the interviewees became friends, mentors, and adoptive family. Our biographies became intertwined in ways we could not have anticipated when we began our fieldwork. Inspired by Ruth Behar's concept of the ethnographer as a vulnerable observer, our methodological approach challenges the traditional view of the participant observer as emotionally and biographically detached (Behar 1996). This perspective highlights that ethnographic work is deeply connected to the researcher's own experiences.

We analyzed the interviews' contents using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2005, 2017), which allowed us to reconstruct and validate participants' conceptual systems. This method helped us build theory by translating abstract values into processes

and categories used by participants. Our analysis reflects the interplay between subjectivity, tradition, history, and narrative, incorporating participants' language and stories (Charmaz 2005).

Finally, we view the process of remembering as a socially situated activity where the meaning of the past largely depends on our present and on our vision for the future (Halbwachs 1992; Zamora 1998; Wertsch 2002; Brescó and Rosa 2012). We pay attention to how the participants' immigration experiences in Israel influenced their perspectives on their past and the ways they chose to share that past with us (Cohen 2017; Cohen and Moreno 2017). Although they did not necessarily know each other, they shared a "style" of remembering, i.e., a way of remembering and narrating their pasts (Zerubavel 2003). Participants constituted a "mnemonic community" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994), as they shared a narrative pattern that represented Morocco as a cultural crossroads with inherent ambiguity.

3. The Spanish Colonial Context

In northern Morocco, especially among the middle and upper classes, Jewish identity development was closely linked with exposure to Spanish culture. This connection is evident in the local Jews' development of a taste for Spanish literature, music, theater, and social habits. Some Jewish children attended Spanish Catholic or military schools with minimal Muslim presence (González 2012), and it was common for middle and upper-class Jewish girls to attend Spanish dancing lessons, a popular extracurricular activity among Spanish girls during Franco's era (Casero 2000). Jews also commonly engaged in work and business relations with Spaniards. Habits like eating *tapas*, having an *aperitivo*, going for a *paseo* on the street as a socialization activity, or celebrating New Year's Eve resulted from contact with Spanish settlers during the colonial period (Moreno 2024). A key element of the connection between Jews and Spaniards in northern Morocco was the Spanish language. The expansion of Spanish commercial and governmental institutions in the region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries made modern peninsular Spanish a significant language (Sayahi 2006). For example, in Tetouan, historian Maite Ojeda-Mata estimates that by 1914, roughly 80% of the city's Jews used Spanish as their primary language at home, while the approximately 12,000 Muslims then living in the city relied extensively and almost exclusively on Arabic in their daily lives (Ojeda-Mata 2017).

In pre-1912 northern Morocco, the Jews living there were characterized by their adherence to *halakha* daily and by their relative communal segregation. As early as the 1930s, however, Jewish community leaders openly expressed their concerns in *Adelante*, a prominent Jewish newspaper in the region, about the declining observance of *Shabbat* among the younger generation of Tangier's Jews. More specifically, the articles "Nuestras Doctrinas: El Respeto Sabático" and "Una Feliz Iniciativa" published in June and November of 1931, respectively, report that some Jewish parents opted to work and send their children to school on the Jewish day of rest. These and other accounts from the 1930s show how the traditional Jewish religious landscape was being eroded by alien European practices.

Among the alien European behaviors that threatened the preservation of a Jewish lifestyle in northern Morocco were the celebrations of the Christian religious holidays. In the 1940s and 1950s, Tangier, for example, the area of *Calle Sevilla* was the hub of Christmas and New Year's festivities for Spanish immigrants (Adila 2012). Holiday festivities were, of course, open to all, but the participation of Jews in such popular Spanish public celebrations of Christmas clashed with Jewish religious etiquette and was frowned upon by many of the community's members. Thus, Simi, who grew up in the *Judería* (Jewish quarter) of Tetouan, recalled arguing with her father over her desire to attend a popular street parade (*la comparsa*) on New Year's Eve. During the interview, she showed Aviad a picture of her young uncle at the festival, stating: "He was not like my father. . . my father did not even allow me to eat a grape [referring to the Spanish custom of eating 12 grapes at midnight on New Year's Eve]." ⁶ In uttering this remark, Simi established her identity as a member of a younger generation of Jews in colonial Spanish Morocco who had felt a stronger

connection with Spanish culture, which, they explained, was a result of intergenerational gaps (i.e., Spanish culture was viewed as modern and therefore attractive). Simi's young uncle celebrating New Year's Eve was presented as the opposite of her father's prohibition that she would partake in the tradition of eating 12 grapes in the last 12 s of the year. This representation of Spanish culture as modern reappeared in other interviews when participants reflected on the allure of Spanish habits and customs among Jews.

More frequently, Jews would attend local bars and sometimes eat non-kosher foods. An unexpected indication of the Jewish demand for non-kosher foodstuffs, typically Spanish dishes, appeared in the northern Morocco Jewish periodical *Or-Luz*. For example, an advertisement for Bar Sevilla, an establishment in Tetouan, clearly stated that it specialized in *gambas al pil pil*—or Spanish-style shrimp. The advertisement nonetheless seems to have been met with ambivalence by the editors of *Or-Luz*, as demonstrated by their repeated publication of the advert upside-down.⁷ However, the fact that the editors agreed to publish the advertisement at all, or that Bar Sevilla's owners aimed to appeal to a Jewish audience through *Or-Luz*, suggests that non-kosher dining was probably not such a rare occurrence among the local Jews in Tetouan (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An Advertisement for Bar Sevilla Published Upside Down (*Or-Luz*, 15 May 1956). Courtesy of the Garzon Family. Stored at BZLPC.

This seeming ambiguity may be better understood by considering that in northern Morocco, the bar, where exposure to non-kosher food was common, was also a key business venue that functioned as a meeting place for Jewish and Spanish men. In the words of one of our interviewees:

This is all very normal. If you go with non-Jewish people and, in order to do business, you need to drink wine or eat a *tapa* or eat shrimp, it's normal that people will do it. [...] The rabbi must bear in mind that the Spaniards had arrived in Tetouan and everyone was doing business with *tapas*, so the rabbi cannot tell the men to stop eating *tapas* since they are drinking non-kosher wine and eating calamari or shrimp... [he can't say this] because that is the only way of doing business.⁸

This interviewee claimed that working alongside Spaniards called for making the “exception” of eating non-kosher food. In his opinion, the consumption of non-kosher food was a compromise that enabled Jews to maintain a certain level of normalcy with their Spanish business partners. Another interviewee recalled his father socializing with Spaniards at the Casino Español in Tetouan, where he would “drink a *chato*⁹ or two, or three [laughs]”.

4. A New Diaspora in Israel

The labels that were applied in Israel to categorize Moroccan immigrants as Jews from Muslim countries—i.e., “Mizrahim” (literally “Orientals”) and the earlier “Edoth Ha-Mizrah” (“Communities of the East”)—reflected the general immigrant absorption

experience in Israel as one of the disadvantaged minorities. Jews from Morocco, whether from the former Spanish zone in the north or the former French zone in the south, were generally treated by the Israeli establishment and public as a unified group from a country of origin whose culture was broadly presumed to be premodern, underdeveloped, socially conservative, and religiously-oriented, in short, the polar opposite of modern Europe. Notwithstanding the assimilative immigrant absorption tactics of the Israeli establishment, the Spanish-speaking Moroccan–Jewish community in Israel constituted a separate cultural and linguistic minority within the larger Jewish Moroccan immigrant population. Moreover, some northern Moroccan immigrants organized an ethnic network to preserve their Judeo-Spanish and northern Moroccan heritage, therefore distinguishing themselves from other Moroccans, particularly those from the former French protectorate. In Israel, they identified themselves as “Spanish Moroccans”; an identity that emphasized their unique Moroccan–Jewish customs with their strong Spanish influence.

In addition to their discomfort with the Israeli social representation of Moroccans as primitive, uneducated, and alien to European culture, some interviewees in Israel emphasized their connection to their pre-migration Spanish colonial background to differentiate themselves from those “other” Moroccans. Identifying themselves as “Spaniards from Morocco”, they expressed a strong affinity for Spanish culture. For example, in an interview with Nina and her cousins, the former showed the interviewer the collection of Spanish traditional objects she treasured: a Manila shawl, castanets, and *peinetas* (small backcombs). She then proudly stated, “Here [at home], Spain is lived and breathed [...] We are more Spanish than the Spaniards”.

The Spanish influence on northern Moroccan Jews was also evident in their diet. Like many other diasporic Jewish communities, the Jews of northern Morocco arrived in Israel with a culinary tradition that celebrated special occasions such as *Shabbat* and religious festivities with myriad gastronomic delicacies. The traditional, typically Spanish–Moroccan Jewish dishes that were preserved after migration include, for example, the *paleve*,¹⁰ *pescado cocho*,¹¹ *jarabullos*,¹² *tortitas*,¹³ *almendraditos*,¹⁴ and the *adafina*,¹⁵ to name just a few. Products of both the Moroccan and the indigenous Sephardi culinary traditions, these dishes represent a Jewish synthesis of the surrounding (Moroccan, Spanish, etc.) cuisines and reflect the distinct cultural influences on northern Moroccan–Jewish life. Indeed, they reappeared on the occasions when Spanish–Moroccan Jewish identity was celebrated, ritualized, and transmitted to the next generation (*Shabbat* and festivities). Deemed “traditional” among Spanish-speaking Moroccan–Jewish immigrants, these dishes effectively guarded and transmitted the flavors of the ancestors, preserved across generations as an integral part of the Jewish legacy.

Besides these “traditional” dishes, different kinds of foodstuffs that were consumed by northern Moroccan Jews in their homeland and that were representative of their very dynamic way of life in the former Spanish protectorate in Morocco would also appear in their memories decades after they migrated to Israel. These other foods included the fare they were accustomed to eating at the Spanish restaurants and bars in colonial Morocco or even at home, which sometimes did not conform with Jewish dietary norms. Memories of eating shrimp, squid, lobster, and other shellfish, as well as *jamón*,¹⁶ coexist with memories of the stringencies of Tetouan’s *shohet* (ritual slaughterer), who often deemed an animal not kosher after slaughter or with memories about the non-negotiable obligation to purchase kosher meat for home consumption. For instance:

Kashrut [in northern Morocco] was very important; Very important. There were lots of kashrut problems because sometimes the *shohet* did not give in when there was a problem with the cow and then there was no meat. But it’s interesting that kashrut was important even for the people that ate non-kosher out of the home. Still, it was very important in the home. (Mois, from Tetouan)

By contrast, Pinto-Abecasis highlighted the desire to blur the differences between Jews and Spaniards during the time of the Spanish protectorate, which led to practices that sometimes violated Jewish religious norms. She underscored how northern Moroccan

immigrants in Israel recalled their childhood visits to bars, where they would eat non-kosher seafood. She presented these practices as a reflection of the complex identity negotiations in the context of Israeli ethnic dynamics. In her book *Tetouan: a Contact Zone between Cultures*, Pinto-Abecasis further explored how these habits persisted after the migrants left Morocco, connecting her informants in Israel to their hometown of Tetouan while influencing their experiences with Israel's diversity. One of her informants noted the challenge of finding "familiar foods" (meaning seafood) in Israel until she discovered a restaurant in Ashdod that served that kind of non-kosher food. Another expressed joy at the arrival of the Russian Aliyah (typically identified as "secular", even more so than the mainstream Israeli secularism), which brought with it these "familiar flavors" that are now available at their restaurants. This joy regarding the new opportunity to access the non-kosher foods of their childhood, according to Pinto-Abecasis, highlights the enduring impact of Tetouan's "other" culinary habits on Moroccan-Jewish immigrants in Israel (Pinto-Abecasis 2021). For her informants, seafood and other non-kosher foodstuffs constituted the flavors of their childhood, but these became even more "forbidden" than before their immigration in a way that rendered the distance between the present and the past even larger.

Against this backdrop, most of our interviewees described eating shrimp, lobster, and other non-kosher foods in Morocco as an "exception". Few sought out non-kosher food after arriving in Israel, regardless of their level of Halakhic observance. Treating the practice as an activity no worse than children's mischief, the interviewees' recollections of eating non-kosher food typically elicited giggles and laughs during our conversations. Humor typically releases the tension of the taboo, the repression of the prohibition (Little 2009). They humorously recounted the different ways that they or their parents would keep the home kosher by keeping a separate pan for shrimp or eating *jamón* outside of the home, but always, without exception, buying only kosher meat for home consumption. The incongruity and contradictions between these practices are what made their accounts funny (Sharp and Thomas 2019). The ambiguity around those contradictions reflected the tension between adherence to Jewish norms and personal desires. Also, these mischievous exceptions subtly adhered to the community's main rule of non-assimilation while selectively subverting less critical rules like kashrut. Insights from these interviews shed light on how their memories of non-kosher habits meet the religious-secular binary that has become prevalent in the Jewish world, especially in Israel.

5. Selkear: Revisiting the Israeli Concept of *Masortiyut*

As mentioned earlier, Yaacov Yadgar has investigated the complex relationship between Mizrahi Jews in Israel and tradition, challenging the religious-secular dichotomy. He coined the term "traditionism" as the appropriate translation of *masortiyut* to describe a dialogical approach where loyalty to tradition coexists with reflection and a selective approach to practice (Yadgar 2015). We examine the concept of *selkear*, which frequently appears in the narratives of immigrants in Israel, as a way to expand the Israeli notion of *masortiyut*.

In this study, we argue that the concept of *selkear* actually comprises three elements: allowing life to continue, integrating differences (of opinion, customs, ideas, etc.), and accepting contradiction. One interviewee, Mercedes, recollected this notion using the following words: "It [Judaism] was a very livable religion; you know what I mean? It wasn't like today when everyone [in Israel] is so *haredi*.¹⁷ It was a religion that had a big element of community and society, to see each other, to be more united, you know what I mean? It was quite like that". Born in Tetouan in 1944, Mercedes stayed there until she immigrated to Israel in 1962 at the age of 18. For her, religious stringencies are more common today in her diasporic context in Israel than they were in the colonial past in Morocco.

Selkear is thus neither a compromise nor a way of concealing one's identity. It is, rather, the ability to make exceptions and to choose under the certainty that, at the end of the day, one is risking very little, or at least very little, of "what really matters", as stated by Esther

Bendahan in her definition of *selkear* (Bendahan 2016). This conceptualization is supported by numerous anecdotes from the broader Spanish–Moroccan diaspora beyond Israel. A rabbi interviewed in Argentina in 2021, for example, spoke nostalgically about the viability of *selkear*:

When you have a firm base, you can *selkear*. [...] I think that natural life in Morocco, with the *selkeo* and everything, was possible because we were in a state of healthy and strong identity. [...] I don't know what came first, the egg or the chicken, whether we stopped the *selkeo* and then. . . What I do know is that, today, our Moroccan–Jewish world in Argentina cannot be compared to that. There everyone knew how to read Hebrew and today boys get to the Bar Mitzvah and don't know how to read an *aleph* and the level of mixed marriages is very high. So, these are two very different cultures. I don't know what the cause was and what was the consequence.

Moroccan–Israeli poet and writer Mois Benarroch touched upon another aspect of *selkear*:

There is something specific to the Maghreb and to Maghrebi thought: the possibility of thinking in a way that includes and does not exclude. Like Derrida. Derrida is Maghrebi thought, which is opposite to Western thought, which is “either or”. Western thought makes you choose between one option or the other. It has to be either “this” or “that”. This is very important, and it's very difficult to explain to someone who has a linear [dichotomous] way of thinking. It's difficult to explain to them that there is a way of thinking that is parallel, three, four different possibilities. [...] They [in the West] always ask you to define yourself. In the Western world you always have to define yourself, you have to be clear, you are this way, or you are this other way, you're a socialist or you're a capitalist. So, what we lost was our way of looking at modernity and its relation to religion. How to be within religious Judaism—because Moroccan Jews were deeply religious—while being able to live with modernism and also with “goyism” [we laugh]. It's possible to live in contradiction, and that possibility of living with contradictions is becoming extinct. [...]

Mois' words reflect a theme that appears in his literary work regarding the gap between the commonplace Eurocentric concept of modernity—the prominent definition among the Israeli cultural elite—and the Sephardi notion of modernity, which, in Mois' opinion, is less dichotomous (Cohen and Leshem 2020). The ability to coexist with the tension between the Jewish and the non-Jewish, the religious/traditional and the secular/new, his argument continues, confers on the individual the more general ability to accept contradiction as part and parcel of the human experience and, possibly, of the experience of this other modernity that does not split the world into dichotomous spheres. This non-dichotomic reality would be a key element of a Sephardi experience of modernity, as expressed by Mois and other interviewees.

The Sephardic community's unique ability to *selkear* constitutes a source of pride for the diaspora of Spanish–Moroccan Jews, who were particularly proud of how the notion of *selkear* presents and represents their ethical heritage.

6. The Social Boundaries of *Selkear*

Our ethnographic research in Israel showcases how the Spanish colonial experience was recollected to tell a story that spoke both about modernization and the revitalization of tradition. Esther, who emigrated from Tetouan to Israel in 1972 with her four children and her husband, emphasized how the *habitus*, or disposition to behave “in the manner of Spaniards”, and *selkear* were connected to social class and gender:

People from the *Judería* [the old Jewish quarter] wouldn't sit at the bar and have an *aperitivo*. Those of us who were from the higher class did it, but it was mostly the men who would have the *aperitivo* before coming home. When my husband and I started dating, I would sit with him at the bar, too, and have a beer together,

but single women would not go to the bar. We would go with our boyfriend. We, the girls, would go for a walk along the main street, like they do in Spain, and the boys would come up to us and talk. On Sundays, when I was a married woman, we would go to the Hotel Nacional for 5 o'clock tea. There was a bar called *El Revertito*¹⁸ and the men used to sit there to have the *aperitivo* and had the *gambitas*¹⁹ with garlic. But there wasn't anything not kosher that would make it to the home. And we would teach the Arab maid to separate between meat dishes and dairy dishes, we taught her not to mix.²⁰

To better understand Esther's observation about cultural boundaries and what it means for immigrants' narratives in Israel, we must consider how, by the early 1900s, northern Morocco's Jewish society had been largely urbanized. During that period, immigrants were flocking to urban centers like Tangier and Tetouan from the smaller towns and villages in both the Spanish protectorate and the French-controlled regions. Most of the Jews in Tetouan had moved to the new urban developments—such as the *Ensanche*—the novelty of which comprised not only the architectural amenities included in the new developments but also their design as a cultural project for the middle classes, i.e., businesses and housing in which Jews were partners and neighbors to the Spaniards (Moreno 2021). Those who, like Esther, had the means to live in the *Ensanche* remember those who stayed in the *Judería*, or Jewish quarter, as having been more connected to tradition and less economically affluent.

Another sign of the socio-spatial divide based on social class was marked using Haketia. By the mid-20th century, the linguistic shift from Haketia to Spanish that occurred among the generation born around the early 1900s was accompanied by a socio-spatial divide, with residents of the older areas continuing to speak Haketia while those living in the newer areas increasingly spoke Spanish. One of our interviewees, Hélène, recalled how her parents would berate her when she used Haketia words she had picked up from older members of the community who still spoke it regularly. Whenever she used a Haketia word or an intonation that resembled the Haketia language, her parents would sharply reprimand her: "Stop! You speak like a girl from the 'Fuente Nueva'", a neighborhood in the Jewish district of the medina of Tangier.²¹ The archaic way of speaking Spanish among the generation born in the nineteenth century was by and large interpreted by their children, Hélène's parents, for example, as signs of underdevelopment and a lack of urban mobility. A similar division occurred in Tetouan between the residents of the *Judería* and those who lived in the *Ensanche* (Pinto-Abecasis 2014).

Other interviewees also echoed the belief that their compatriots who lived in the *Judería* did not engage in those "less kosher" behaviors because Jewish participation in the Spanish cultural milieu was expressed through performative acts that characterized a social class and that were executed to confirm one's association with Spanish culture. Isaac and Raquel emigrated with their families from Tetouan to Israel at the beginning of the 1960s when he was 21 years old and she was 14. Though they knew each other in Tetouan, only years later in Israel did they meet again and eventually marry. This is how they remembered the connection between religiosity and social class:

Isaac: I am completely sure that nobody in the *Judería* would sit at the bar and eat those things. I have no doubt about it.

Raquel: They didn't have the money!

Isaac: No, it wasn't just because they didn't have money. People in the *Judería* had a very deep religiosity.

Relatedly, some of the female interviewees noted that sitting at the bar and eating an *aperitivo* was not only connected to one's social class but was also a gendered practice. Leah recalled:

Look, this is really interesting because, until I met him [her husband], I never ate non-kosher anywhere. I was a child, where was I going to go? I never had this kind of youth of going out to have fun. I was looking after my mother all

the time. At home it was kosher and that was it. But when I met him, it was like, “well, if he eats shrimp, then I’ll eat it too!” [laughs], “if he has that, I’ll have it too”. That is, I gave myself my own justifications and, also, we were modern, it’s not that we were old-fashioned. It’s like I liberated myself.

Although these practices were violations of Jewish dietary laws, they were often treated by the interviewees as akin to nothing more than mischievous behavior that, in general, happened only outside the home. Female interviewees spoke about this apparent openness and lax alignment with Jewish law as having been the result of people’s “liberal” or “modern” mind, something that younger people—both men and women—or “open-minded” men would do and the men’s wives or girlfriends would follow. The possibility of eating non-kosher food was connected, in Leah’s narrative above, to “going out” and “having fun”, activities that, for her, were simply not possible before she was married because before she and her husband were wed, she had cared for her sick mother. Giving herself “her own justifications”, therefore, was her way of making an exception, of transgressing without disengaging. In other words, if her husband did it, then she could do it, too. Her consumption of these forbidden foods was thus part of her “liberation” of herself, which she could do in Morocco without, in fact, disaffiliating herself from Jewish belonging.

Esther also strengthens the notion that the consumption of non-kosher food at the bar was a gendered practice. She mentioned that a single woman would not sit at the bar, which is generally referred to as a male space where women did not go unaccompanied. Like Leah, Esther also “put the blame” for her consumption of the non-kosher delicacies she fondly recalled on her husband: “I remember the *gambitas al pipil*.²² My husband led me astray, because he already ate those things when we met [laughs], but in the street, not at home”.

The nostalgic context in which non-kosher food was brought up in interviews was sharpened by the following conversation between the cousins Etty, Miriam, Felicidad, and Nina:

Etty: Look, we miss the *peladillas*,²³ the pine-nuts

Miriam: The pine-nuts!

Nina: The *polvorones*!²⁴

Etty: The *garrapiñadas*.²⁵ *Polvorones* not anymore because they’re made with lard.

Nina: No! Someone got me some made with olive oil.

Etty: Those are no good.

Miriam: They make them with oil for the Moors!

Etty: But the *polvorones* that we ate were made with lard! [We laugh] The *turrón*,²⁶ the almond cake. . .

Nina: The *Belén*²⁷ [laughs]

Etty: The tiger-nuts, the *horchata*²⁸

Felicidad: Wait, wait, do you remember the cornets?

Etty: Made of cinnamon!

Felicidad: No, not those cornets! The paper cornets with snails and a pin inside? [we laugh]

Nina: No, I wouldn’t eat snails, but I ate crab in Larache

Felicidad: The snails? We ate them like sunflower seeds!

Miriam: And we’d get them out with a pin!

Angy: I used to eat every Sunday [they all laugh]

While each woman added an element to this list of delicacies that she missed from her past life in Spanish Morocco, most of the foods recalled by the women happened to be non-kosher, which is precisely what qualifies the nostalgic connection of these foods to Spain, i.e., this connection was formed by temporarily suspending Jewish religious norms, which did not undermine the perceived legitimacy or validity of Jewish law. Etty introduced a disclaimer when she said, “*Polvorones* not anymore because they’re made with lard”. By saying “not anymore”, she effectively distanced herself from those old habits, implying that she would not engage in the same behavior today because the course of her diasporic background has changed, and the meaning of eating non-kosher has shifted with it. In the current religious normative system in Israel, the consumption of pork, snails, or crab would immediately relegate them to the category of “secular” (*hiloni*) Jew as opposed to “religious” (*dati*) or even just “traditional” (*masorti*) Jew.

Angy’s remark that she, too, for a period of her life, used to eat snails every Sunday humorously highlighted their shared experiences, causing them all to laugh. Before the interview, the women could not have known how the interviewer might react to such memories about Morocco, given that they did not know Angy’s personal history or whether she would judge them based on the secular-religious dichotomy often endorsed by the younger generation in Israel. Despite Angy’s close communication with Nina, the rest of the group did not know whether the interviewer agreed with the younger generation’s stricter views or whether she would sympathize with the participants’ recollections.

Miriam continued to describe the practices in which Jews engaged to imitate the ways of Spaniards, stating in a facetious tone: “Until not long ago, we used to sing *Granada*”.²⁹ She laughed, as if, in retrospect, there was something ludicrous or excessive about those practices that, in the past, seemed so natural. From today’s perspective, as Moroccan Jews living in Israel, singing *Granada* or eating Spanish non-kosher delicacies appear as amusing and even funny imitations of “the ways of the Spaniards” from which their current lives could not be further. Felicidad, in a more serious tone, added: “My place is Larache, the Spanish environment because we lived in a Spanish environment. It’s the whole combination: we were three religions that lived together and shared everything, in peace. But I’m not referring to the three cultures”. The “Spanish environment” is an expression that marks the difference between living in Spain and living under Spanish colonial rule. Also, in Felicidad’s account, this expression marks the difference between the idealized representation of Spain’s medieval past and the fond memories of her own past in colonial Morocco. This was further clarified by Felicidad’s remark that she was not referring to “the three cultures” or *La España de las tres culturas* (“the Spain of the three cultures”). Felicidad wanted to distance herself from the idealization of Spain’s medieval past, emphasizing that the “Spanish environment” she recalled was the colonial one, marked by a coexistence that was so ingrained in her personal memory rather than having anything to do with the myth of a remote Spanish past when Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived in peace and harmony. Her cousin Nina immediately added with a smile: “And on Sundays, we would go to the *matinée* to the *Cine Ideal*”. She said this to clarify the meaning of “the Spanish environment” in Felicidad’s account. They were showing the interviewer how these practices, once integral to their lives, now felt foreign outside their original context.

The immigrants’ accounts of their experiences as Jews in Morocco were transmitted through laughter as if those were practices that made sense in a certain game with its own rules, which were distinct from both the contemporary norms and most of the pre-immigration life routines. Laughter when recounting stories about eating non-kosher food signaled an awareness of the ambiguous nature of the actions of those Jews who chose to play a game in which they behaved *as if* they were “fully” Spanish.

7. The Spatial Boundaries of *Selkear*

Whereas Leah and Yosef, both from Tetouan, lived a religious life in Israel, they still nostalgically recalled their practices of eating non-kosher food, when interviewed at their

home in Jerusalem. To counter the potential image of their Moroccan past as having been “secular” they also emphasized that it was rare for someone to buy non-kosher meat for home consumption.

Yosef: There were exceptions in Tetouan. I remember a family who used to buy non-kosher meat

Leah: That’s right

Y: But in Tetouan people ate shrimp and drank [non-Kosher] wine. . .

L: [Laughs] at home, at home it was kosher

Y: At home it was kosher, but we ate shrimp and lobster

L: No, you didn’t!

Y: Yes, we did!

L: Inside the home?

Y: Yes! Shrimp, lobster, at home! Partridge caught by the hunters. . .

L: [laughs]

Y: My father was kosher but those things. . .

Interviewer: [laughs] With all respect, if there was shrimp, how was the kitchen kosher? [laughs]

L: One didn’t pay attention to those things! Here, let me explain something

Y: My home was kosher but we ate shrimp! [we all laugh]

L: We were from Tetouan! You must understand!

Y: We’d drive on Shabbat, we’d go hang out in Tangier

Angy: But you were *shomrei shabbat*³⁰

Y: No, just Jews [laughs]. On Shabbat, we’d eat the *adafina* and we’d go to Ceuta, Tangier. . .

Leah and Yosef speak about their past as marked by its innocence: “One didn’t pay attention to those things!”; “We were from Tetouan! You must understand!” As if being from Tetouan necessarily involved seemingly odd, or perhaps even inappropriate, discrepancies that would be unthinkable in today’s world, particularly in Israel. Here, the couple giggled as Leah facetiously pretended to be shocked that Yosef’s family ate shrimp and lobster at home while he continued to add sacrilegious elements to the list of their mischief, to his wife’s great amusement. Yosef and Leah currently lead an observant life in Israel. Their playfulness and flexibility in the interview sustained a mischievous attitude marked by ambiguity of intent and sense (see [Ratliff 2018](#))—did Leah not know? Is Yosef exaggerating?—which made us all laugh.

Contradictions are an essential part of our participants’ past, as exemplified by remarks such as “at home it was kosher, but we ate shrimp” that were repeated by several interviewees. Both elements of that statement—the kosher status of their homes and their regular consumption of non-kosher foods such as shrimp that they considered delicacies—were equally important to the interviewees’ lived experience in Morocco, regardless of their incompatibility in the eyes of those who cling to the secular-religious dichotomy. In this context, humor and laughter allow and make space for the mismatch between norms and daily life, between expectations and reality, and between tradition and autonomy, producing a gamut that bridges them.

Moreover, the contradictions that the interviewees described in their accounts were not discussed as problems that had to be solved. At the heart of such narratives about *selkear* and the consumption of non-kosher food in Morocco was the ability of the interviewees to simply “live with it”, “let it be”. For those community members who indulged, suspending the norms of kashrut to enjoy forbidden delicacies like ham, shrimp, and lobster,

to name but a few of their favorites, does not mean canceling or rejecting those norms. *Selkear* thus also represents a moment in time that is placed “outside the norm”, as most interviews show.

8. Staying Kosher: The Limits of *Selkear*

The hierarchy of actions that were allowed and forbidden in the Jewish community was organized around and driven by a strong sense of communal unity. In that context, relations between the Jews and Spaniards who resided in the protectorate presented a complex dynamic of identification and distance. The separation between the Jewish community and its Spanish neighbors was most clearly marked by the prohibition of intermarriage, which was strictly upheld by Jews, Muslims, and Spaniards alike. *Kashrut*, or Jewish dietary law, was another kind of normative system that bolstered this separation. The observance of *kashrut*, however, admitted a higher level of ambiguity than intermarriage. Still, limits to this ambiguity had to be set. Any normative system needs markers (actions, words, gestures, etc.) of disaffiliation from the group that threatens the core of the normative system and that are, therefore, to be avoided if one wants to remain within the group. The establishment of these limits favors the sustainability and continuity of the group.³¹

There are two limits that our interviewees remember as non-negotiable: the purchase of only kosher meat for home consumption and intermarriage. Marrying a non-Jewish person was remembered by all our interviewees as their parents’ biggest fear and as completely out of bounds. Mercedes recalled this prohibition as follows:

The community was super important, more important even than religion. If someone drove on Shabbat, it was not a big deal, but dating a Christian... [laughs][...] On the one hand, they were very open religiously but, on the other hand, they weren’t open at all when it came to mixing and assimilating [...] That was something sacred. Even though they weren’t religious.

The seeming “openness” that allowed some of them to relax their observance of *kashrut* laws was thus not a liberal disposition that completely dissolved the ethno-religious differences into universalism. The community, and not Jewish law, is fondly remembered as the heart of Jewish life in Morocco. Continuity was, therefore, a core value, which rendered intermarriage unacceptable. In short, their refusal to acculturate was expressed through their rejection of intermarriage. *Kashrut*, as we will see, played a similarly important role in maintaining community continuity.

There was a total consensus among our interviewees that the vast majority of Jews in the Spanish protectorate in Morocco bought only kosher meat for home consumption. They did not know of anyone who would buy non-kosher meat: Mercedes and Raquel did not even know where the Christian and Muslim butchers’ shops were located, and Yosef heard about a single family that was known to engage in this outlandish behavior. An examination of how our interviewees remember the immense importance of buying only kosher meat shows that it was among the most significant markers of Jewish identification, i.e., an act of belonging. In what follows, we include a few examples of how different interviewees referred to the non-negotiability of buying kosher meat, regardless of other, less kosher habits that they may have had:

Nobody ate meat that wasn’t kosher. As far as I remember, it was like that everywhere, including in the Western part of Tetouan, in the *Ensanche*. Their meat was kosher as well. In the street, we’d eat anything, even a piece of brick. But not at home.

(Mario, from Tetouan).

We used to eat more or less anything at home, but the meat we’d buy at a kosher butcher. Always.

(Sol, from Tetouan)

At home everything was super kosher. Meat in Tetouan was kosher, kosher, kosher, because in Tetouan, the guy that did the shechitah,³² if they slaughtered three animals, two were terefah³³ and one was kosher. The one from Tetouan was famous [laughs]. The one from Tangier was more liberal, and everything was kosher, but the one from Tetouan. . . my brother used to laugh about it [. . .] We had to bring the meat from Tangier because there wasn't enough meat in Tetouan. (Esther, from Tetouan)

In Tetouan there were exceptions. There was one family that would buy non-kosher meat.

(Yosef, from Tetouan)

In Tetouan they were very orthodox, very strict from a religious point of view. In Tangier and Larache we were more laid back, more liberal, except for a few super orthodox families. But the custom was that we all ate kosher, or 95% of us ate kosher.

(José, from Larache)

We posit that the preservation of communal unity demanded a high tolerance for ambiguity (Cohen 2020), but it also caused certain actions to be sanctioned as expressions of not belonging. Our interviewees point to the protective role that kashrut played against acculturation by separating the private space of the home from the public space. Culinary systems like kashrut situate us relative to one other, and as we have seen, the laws of kashrut may be bent and transgressed. However, this community rejected acculturation and prioritized cohesion and continuity, and therefore, it needed to set limits to define how exactly kashrut could be bent or transgressed.

For home consumption, our interviewees recalled that the vast majority of Jews would never buy anything other than kosher meat. They remembered buying non-kosher meat being completely censored by the community, something they would not even think of doing. When trying to make sense of the extent to which kashrut laws were observed vis-à-vis the case of less observant people, they claimed that the great importance of buying only kosher meat could not have been for religious reasons, since they ate shrimp and ham as well. Sisters Raquel and Mercedes explained this contradiction:

Mercedes: 99% of Jews in Tetouan ate kosher meat

Raquel: But they ate shrimp and *jamón*

M: OK, but that was outside the home

R: No, no, haven't we eaten ham and shrimp at home?

M: Yes, but what I mean is that mom never ever fed me non-kosher meat. Do you understand? **Everybody bought kosher meat and only kosher meat.**

R: But that's not because of religious reasons because if you go and eat a *jamón* sandwich afterwards. . .

M: I know, that's what I'm saying.

R: Those are the contradictions of the Tetouanis.

M: Exactly. They lived as it was *noach* ["easy", "comfortable", in Hebrew] **Among Jews it was frowned upon to buy non-kosher meat.**

R: It was a fad. For example, they liked *kashrut* because they felt there was more *bikoret* ["inspection", in Hebrew]

M: They thought it was cleaner

R: Yeah, cleaner.

M: Also, you see, it used to be difficult to *lehasig* ["get"/"find" in Hebrew] meat for the *pascuas* ["holidays", in Spanish], when it was the *pascuas* and they wanted

tongue, because they only slaughtered one cow so there was only one tongue, you understand? But Jews, no matter who, they did not buy meat from. . . *afilu* ["even", in Hebrew] they looked down on you if you were to buy meat from. . . [. . .] I remember there was a family that bought non-kosher meat, and it was really frowned upon.

Angy And why was it so frowned upon?

M: Because it was like *livgod bakehila*, *loyoda'at* ["betraying the community, I don't know", in Hebrew]

There seems to be a difference between eating *jamón* and shrimp when one is *outside the home* and serving non-kosher meat *at home*, the latter of which was branded an unthinkable abomination in the narratives of our interviewees. Mercedes and Raquel considered this a contradiction that they attributed to the nonchalant character of Tetouani Jews, who, according to Mercedes, did as they pleased. Their freedom to do as they pleased, however, had limits, since the community disapproved of the few who crossed the line and bought non-kosher meat. Mercedes and Raquel offered some explanations: *kashrut* was a fad, some thought kosher meat was cleaner, more supervised, etc. Finally, Mercedes reached the heart of the matter: buying non-kosher meat was "like betraying the community".

Buying non-kosher meat, therefore, was an act of disaffiliation, i.e., an act of disloyalty. By the same logic, purchasing kosher meat was an act of loyalty that signified one's family's belonging to the community. In this sense, the authority and legitimacy of *kashrut* remained intact, regardless of how much some would bend or transgress its norms. To transgress is not to renounce one's belonging to the Jewish community. Thus, the purchase of non-kosher meat at a Spanish or Muslim butcher shop for home consumption would have been the equivalent of public acknowledgment of one's disengagement from the Jewish community, while eating shrimp at a bar with other Jews was merely a transgression that neither jeopardized one's belonging nor caused one to disengage from *kashrut* observance. Joëlle Bahloul has defined the kosher butcher as the "antechamber of the home kitchen" (Bahloul 1995, p. 492), emphasizing the symbolic function of kosher meat in the space of the home. Indeed, our interviewees emphasized a clear distinction between the home and public spaces: at home, meat had to be kosher. The home, as a domestic and family space, was seen as a place that must be maintained as distinctly Jewish.

Bollnow (2011) described the home as a sacred space differentiated from the outer, profane space. Similarly, food anthropologists have observed that home foods play a crucial role in maintaining ethnic identity and family bonds among minority communities, contrasting with "exogenous" foods from the majority environment (Abbotts 2016).

According to our participants' narratives, eating non-kosher food was considered wrong—perhaps not wrong enough *morally* to avoid it at all costs, but wrong nonetheless—or at least forbidden by a system of norms, i.e., Jewish law, whose legitimacy most people recognized. The space of the home was remembered as a Jewish, and therefore, kosher space precisely because of its familiarity and its function in ensuring continuity. In fact, even the few people who recalled that they used to eat shrimp at home also remembered that their mothers would cook the delicacy in a separate pan and serve it on a separate plate or even on a newspaper. The extra pots and the separate plates or the newspaper replacements for their regular dishware functioned as boundaries. Relatedly, in her ethnographic study of North African Jewish immigrants in France, Bahloul explained that the pots where home food is cooked are a metaphor for the domestic world, thus the efforts to keep them clean from forbidden meats (Bahloul 1995, p. 490). According to Bahloul, the dual opposition between kosher and forbidden meats reflects a broader duality between the in-group (Jews) and the out-group (non-Jews), turning the home into a sacred space (cf. *ibid.*, p. 493). As reported by our interviewees, forbidden meats were never part of festive meals like Shabbat or holidays, where family gatherings were central (cf. *ibid.*, p. 490). While eating forbidden meats could be seen as a symbolic passage towards the world of the other (cf.

ibid.), kosher meat marked the boundaries of the in-group, protecting the key community values of family and household (cf. ibid.).

They both created and marked the required distance from the foreign and forbidden. The social boundaries that separated the Jewish community from the non-Jewish world around them were marked and protected by the strict and systematic opposition between when, where, and how both forbidden and kosher meats would be eaten. One interviewee, Nina, remembered those boundaries and also the distinction between kosher and non-kosher in her family:

Nina: My parents kept kosher, the only [non-kosher] thing we did eat was shrimp [laughs]. But how did my mother do it? She cooked them separately. We had the pot for the shrimp, and it was separate. My father didn't eat them. They made us rice and gave us shrimp. And they also ate them at the café. But that was the only thing! *Jamón*, bacon, none of those things. Sometimes I'd go out with the Christians, for a *yom huledet o mashehu kازه* [switching to Hebrew: "for a birthday or something like that"] and they'd say "Nina, *ze lo kasher*" [Hebrew "Nina, it's not kosher"] and I didn't eat. Never, never. No bacon, no pork.

Interviewer: Just shrimp

Nina: Just shrimp

Nina switched from Spanish to Hebrew in the same sentence. She repeated the warning of her Spanish childhood friend in Hebrew, though obviously, his original utterance had been in Spanish. Nina remembered her childhood home as a kosher home. Her mother would make an "exception" and serve shrimp that had been cooked in a separate pot, i.e., it was not prepared with the kosher kitchenware with which she cooked for the whole family. Nina's father showed no interest in this foreign, non-kosher food, and he refrained from eating shrimp. Nina even remembered her non-Jewish friends alerting her when they were at celebrations together if the food that they were eating was not kosher so that she would not accidentally eat it. The main exception to this norm, which she otherwise observed faithfully, was shrimp. When she discussed this issue, Nina, like the rest of our interviewees, laughed as if her eating of shrimp had been an act of mischief done by an otherwise well-behaved child. Indeed, hers was not a family that actively challenged or rejected *halakha* or *kashrut* out of ideology. Their habit of imbibing shrimp was not an act of disengagement or emancipation from the Jewish traditional way of eating and living, but rather, it was an exception to a norm that they upheld. The ability to make that exception is at the core of the dual experience of tradition and modernity that we examine in this work. In our interview, Nina exhibited the ability to live with contradictions, which is key to *selkear*, as we highlighted before. These contradictions are constitutive of the interviewees' ethical ability to let things be without judging. As such, there was no need to solve those contradictions because she knew how to live with them.

Simmel noted that boundaries are always relational—they enable the simultaneous existence of the realities that they separate (Simmel 2010; Cantó-Milà 2020). Our interviewees laughed when they recalled their mothers' strategies to prevent shrimp from coming into contact with their pots and dishes. Gestures like those of their mothers, however, were done to mark a limit, to set boundaries. Eating non-kosher food outside the home or keeping a separate pot for shrimp were both effective boundaries between Jewish life and non-Jewish life, regardless of the incompatibility of those boundaries with a Halakhic system. Mercedes and Raquel added yet another layer to the system of categorization that regulated the need for boundaries:

Raquel: *Jamón*, *bederech klal* ["in general" in Hebrew] it was outside the home, shrimp, calamari, and mussels at home. . .

Angy: Wait, so *jamón* in the street and shrimp at home.

Mercedes: Yes, because it was pork. Shrimp were like fish. It was something different. [we laugh] It was a very special way of keeping kosher.

R: Just as today the attitude is to go crazy with religion and say, “you can’t do this, you can’t do that”, our attitude lent more to the lighter side [we laugh]. For example, I’ve had shrimp at my sister-in-law’s place, but she served it on a newspaper, not on the plates, because you couldn’t serve shrimp on the plates. Now you tell me if this makes sense! And she was a modern and educated woman and all that. But these were things that were. . .

M: Ingrained in you

Abstention from pork continues to play a symbolic role in the resistance to assimilation (Dursteler 2019). In Judaism, while both pork and shrimp are prohibited by *halakhah*, the distinction between them, as reflected in our interviewees’ accounts, highlights a hierarchy not commonly recognized by the Israeli perception of *kashrut*, where both shrimp and pork are typically seen as symbols of non-observance. This hierarchy between *jamón* and shrimp that Mercedes and Raquel emphasize is also a boundary that identifies *jamón* as a “worse” infraction than shrimp because of the symbolic role of pork.

Raquel and Mercedes spoke about their awareness of the need to set a limit, a boundary. This need was more important than the compatibility between that limit and the general normative system of which it is a part. In other words, the fact that these practices (eating *jamón* and shrimp) are not legitimate according to Jewish law was not the issue. What *was* at stake, rather than observance (of the law), was belonging (to the community). The loyalty to one’s belonging activated these separation practices, these limits that individuals would place on themselves. In so doing, they were accepting the function of the law (to preserve a way of life) even when they did not obey all its norms. None of our interviewees expressed any interest in the flexibilization or transformation of *kashrut*. Eating shrimp on a newspaper page was a way to signal one’s awareness of that prohibition, but at the same time, it also confirmed its legitimacy. Instead of a practice that demanded a change in *kashrut*, their habit of eating shrimp and other non-kosher Spanish delicacies was an infraction of a norm to which they remained loyal, though they might not always observe it. Thus, the critical importance of only having kosher meat at home.

9. Transformation of Spanish Customs into “Jewish” Habits

The boundaries between Spaniards and Jews were also established by transforming decidedly non-Jewish Spanish practices into customs of the Jewish community. For example, going out for *tapas* after synagogue services on *Shabbat*. There were those who would pay during *Shabbat* and those who would pay after *Shabbat* since it is forbidden by Jewish law to use money on the day of rest. Going to the synagogue on Saturday morning and then going out for beers and *tapas* to have the *aperitivo* mimics what Spaniards used to do on Sunday mornings. These practices, however, did not contribute to Jews’ assimilation any more than going to the beach after *Shabbat* services or *tefilah*. Quite the contrary, these customs became integral parts of Jewish community life, activities that Jews engaged in with other Jews, and as such, they became “Jewish” practices in social terms, although not of the religious kind. Here are some examples:

“The men would first go to *tefilah*.³⁴ They would come out of *tefilah* and. . . in Tetouan, in my time, we got to a period when men would go to *tefilah* and then, when they came back, we would have an *aperitivo* in the Hotel Nacional or we would go watch horse-riding. It was allowed. I mean, “allowed”, I remember my grandfather didn’t agree with this thing of driving to the riding club or to the beach in the summer”.

(Esther, about Tetouan)

“Moroccan Judaism was very open. On Saturdays, my father would go leave the synagogue and he would go to have an *aperitivo* at the café”

(Miriam, about Larache)

“At home we were never religious in an exaggerated way. My father, for example, would go to the Beit HakNeset [synagogue] in the morning and then, when he was out, he would go get an aperitivo at any bar. It wasn’t a problem”.

(Mercedes, about Tetouan)

Going for *tapas* was an infraction that reinforced the community bond. This and other infractions eventually became Jewish practices, although obviously not in a religious sense. After leaving Morocco, these practices would be remembered when they were asked about their religious observance in Morocco. Accepting contradictions was the key to maintaining a strong community bond. In our opinion, this tolerance of contradictions fortified the community and created a buffer zone between the Jewish community and the Spaniards, thus reducing the potential that Jewish individuals would assimilate culturally. It was not the discipline of Halakhic observance but rather the warm familiarity of community bonds that made it possible to accept such contradictions (Cohen Forthcoming). The narratives related by our interviewees indicate that their tolerance for contradictions was another important part of their community’s cohesiveness.

In her final work, Nina Pinto-Abecasis analyzed the memories of *piropos*³⁵ among Spanish-speaking Moroccan–Jewish women. She said that these memories were connected to the violation of different taboos, especially those related to *kashrut* and impurity. She emphasized that the norms of *kashrut* (eating pork or shrimp, for example) were violated against the background of a conservative and traditional community. She pointed out that the rabbis of the large and well-respected Jewish community of northern Morocco wielded considerable authority (Pinto-Abecasis 2021). Indeed, as we pointed out earlier, this was not a liberal community that embraced diversity as a value. This was, as Pinto-Abecasis indicated, a conservative world whose parameters were defined by the Spanish colonial project in Morocco, the endogamy of ethno-religious communities, and the inequality between men and women. Nevertheless, several of our interviewees referenced a certain lost freedom in their narratives, that of belonging beyond one’s ascription to abstract principles or ideas.

10. Conclusions

This article discussed the distinct identity of Spanish-speaking Moroccan Jews in Israel, who differentiated themselves from the broader Moroccan–Jewish community by emphasizing their Spanish heritage. In response to the general Israeli perception of Moroccans as primitive and uneducated, northern Moroccan Jews in Israel sought to highlight their unique cultural and linguistic background, identifying as “Spanish Moroccans”. This identity was reflected in their culinary traditions, which included both traditional Spanish–Moroccan Jewish dishes and memories of consuming non-kosher foods from their past. We showed how these memories, including eating shrimp and ham, coexist with their adherence to *kashrut* at home, illustrating a complex negotiation between religious norms and personal autonomy. The humorous recollections of eating non-kosher food reveal underlying tensions and the ongoing impact of their Israeli experience on their representations of their Moroccan past.

As we argued, the ethics, attitudes, and practices that our interviewees described may be seen at first glance as “traditionist” or *masorati*. Mizrahi Jews constitute most of the people who define themselves as *masortim* in Israel,³⁶ as did most of our interviewees. Today’s *masortim* represents the endurance of an attitude that was born centuries ago, and that is rooted in the Sephardi intellectual legacy, branching out to rabbinic thought and the in-betweenness that has marked the Sephardi historical experience. Yet, our study examines the complexities of maintaining *kashrut* among Jews in northern Morocco, where a strong communal identity coexisted with dietary transgressions.

In Haketia an antonym for *selkear* is *hokkear*, which literally means to scour or to scrub. Applied to people, the word refers to someone who asks too many questions. The literality and intrusive inquiry that characterize *hokkear* are the opposite of the ethical attitude represented in *selkear*. A literal interpretation of *kashrut* would explain the consumption of

ham and shrimp by Jews as a sign of assimilation. Besides their infractions of the Jewish dietary laws, however, our interviewees' lives were organized around and guided by their Judaism and were far from a process of assimilation, as they saw it. They were engaged with their community institutions, and their social life was mostly Jewish, thus preserving a foundation of Jewish normativity. After all, as mentioned, most of the Jews in Tetouan would buy only kosher meat for their homes and would rarely eat non-kosher food in the house. Community members who allowed non-kosher food in their homes—mostly shrimp, according to our interviewees—relied on seemingly odd countermeasures, such as keeping a separate pan with which to fry shrimp or serving the shrimp on a separate plate or even a piece of newspaper to prevent the non-kosher food from coming into contact with their kosher dishware.

These countermeasures can be seen as strategies to navigate the boundary between permitted and forbidden practices. From the perspective of modernization as a secularization narrative, buying kosher meat while also indulging in shrimp would be seen, at best, as a remnant of the past or an atavism. However, understanding these practices requires moving beyond a literal Halakhic analysis and binary notions of secularism versus religion. The interviewees' memories offer insights that challenge this dichotomy, suggesting a more nuanced view of the tension between autonomy and loyalty to tradition.

Memories of such flexible social behaviors, shared by Spanish–Moroccan Jews, acquired a patrimonial value as they settled in Israel. In the society where they live today, that tolerance to ambiguity seems to have been replaced by a demand to clearly identify with ideas, ideologies, values and principles that separate societies into groups defined by their identities. In this context, their memories became part of the patrimony of the Spanish–Moroccan Jewish diaspora. The sense of loss and the values this past represented appeared as having something important to contribute to today's world.

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Notes

¹ Hebrew for “religious service”.

² A typical Spanish custom of having a small bite (“aperitive”) before lunch.

- 3 We have decided not to replace the terms used by our informants with English translations but, rather, use footnotes to explain their meaning. The reasons are twofold: first, it partially preserves the multiple languages and cultural codes they used in the interviews, and second, we do not assume that our reader is necessarily Anglo-Saxon and unfamiliar with Jewish and Spanish culture.
- 4 There is a trend in research on halacha to disprove the thesis that Sephardi rabbinic leadership was lenient and open to change (see [Goldberg 2004](#)). An example of some of the arguments laid out by researchers can be found in a discussion between Benjamin Brown and Zvi Zohar in Hebrew, in the journal *Akdamut* (see [Brown 2001](#); [Zohar 2001](#)).
- 5 Each interview, lasting an average of three hours, was conducted in Spanish by the Spanish author and in Hebrew and Spanish by the Israeli author. Following the interviews, we maintained ongoing contact with our participants, often developing friendships and enduring relationships. To protect their privacy, all names have been changed unless explicitly requested otherwise.
- 6 An interview with Simi (pseudonym), interviewed by Aviad Moreno, 2009, Israel.
- 7 Apparently, it is not a misprint, since the advert was published upside down in other issues; See *Or-Luz* 15 May 1956, 1; 31 May 1956, 16; 15 June 1956, 21.
- 8 Interview with Mois Benarroch (real name) 2013, Israel.
- 9 *Chato*: short glass of wine.
- 10 Passover cookies.
- 11 Fish with a tomato and red pepper sauce.
- 12 Sweet concoction made with almond, *matzah*, flour, and mint, typical of *Shavuot*.
- 13 A kind of cracker.
- 14 An almond-based pastry.
- 15 A stew consisting of chickpeas, potatoes, eggs and meat, commonly eaten on *Shabbat*.
- 16 *Jamón*: cured ham.
- 17 *Haredi*: ultra-Orthodox (Heb).
- 18 El Revertito was a Spanish bar in Tetouan, whose owner was Miguel Muñoz also known as “Revertito”, the secretary of the Club Taurino de Tetuán, a club for bull-fighting connoisseurs. It was a very popular bar during the times of the Protectorate. The Moroccan writer Mohammed Choukri mentioned it in his autobiography *Streetwise*.
- 19 Gambitas: little shrimp
- 20 Simi (pseudo-name). Jerusalem, 2020, Israel.
- 21 An interview with Hélène (pseudonym), 2009 Israel, interviewer: Aviad Moreno.
- 22 *Gambas al pilpil*: shrimp fried in olive oil with garlic and chilli.
- 23 *Peladillas*: almonds in a hard sugar shell.
- 24 *Polvorones*: shortbread made with lard.
- 25 *Garrafiñadas*: caramel-coated almonds.
- 26 *Turrón*: Christmas nougat.
- 27 *Belén*: recreation of the nativity scene with figurines.
- 28 *Horchata*: tiger-nut beverage.
- 29 *Granada*: song written in 1932 by Agustín Lara about the city of Granada, Spain.
- 30 *Shomer Shabbat* (pl. *shomrei*): Shabbat observant.
- 31 A comparable thesis was held by Mary Douglas in her argument about impurity as connected to disorder. According to Douglas, the function of taboo is to protect the categories of the world and the consensus about its organization, reducing intellectual and social disorder ([Douglas 2002](#)).
- 32 *Shechitah*: kosher slaughter.
- 33 *Terefah*: not apt for consumption.
- 34 *Tefilah*: religious services at the synagogue, in Hebrew.
- 35 *Piropo*: catcall or flirtatious remark said by a man to a woman in the street.
- 36 According to a recent study conducted by Gabriel Abensour, even though the category *masorti* is still identified with Mizrahi Jews, it has become a “post-ethnic phenomenon” ([Abensour 2023](#)).

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