

## Honoring A Muslim King Who Saved His Jewish Citizens

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Princess Lalla Hasna, Granddaughter of King Mohammed V and members of the Moroccan Diplomatic corps at the KIVUNIM Convocation, December 20, 2015. Photo credit: Asher Krell.



It was truly an extraordinary moment. The majestic doors of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun on Manhattan's Upper West Side opened one evening last month and in walked Her Highness, Princess Lalla Hasna of Morocco, accompanied by an impressive

entourage of Moroccan dignitaries. The 700 guests – Jews, Christians and Muslims – rose in respect as she made her way down the center aisle, her royal kaftan beautifully decorated with Moroccan Jewish designs.

The evening, a decade in the making, was the concluding chapter of a story that goes back almost 75 years, a long-delayed effort to pay tribute to a Muslim king, a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, who protected his Jewish citizens during the Holocaust.

The little-known story took place in 1941 when King Mohammad V, then 32, stood firm in informing the Vichy French colonial authorities: “I strongly disapprove of the new anti-Jewish laws and refuse to associate myself with a measure of which I disapprove. I wish to inform you that as in the past the Jews stay under my protection and I refuse any distinction made between my subjects.”

The princess was the special guest of Kivunim, an international, post-high school gap year program I founded that has Jewish students visit Israel and Jewish communities around the world to better understand and appreciate Jewish history and the culture of countries where Jews have lived. The princess was at B’nai Jeshurun on behalf of her brother, King Mohammad VI, to receive a tribute honoring the legacy of their grandfather, King Mohammad V.

When the war was over as many as 300,000 Moroccan Jews were secure in body and in soul.

Had this story been known and celebrated, Holocaust denial within the Arab world would have been an insult to the memory of King Mohammed V. Yet outside the world of Morocco’s Jews and Muslims, almost all of whom venerate the king for his resistance to the Nazi-inspired, anti-Jewish legislation of the Petain government, this glorious story has been a virtual secret.

On my first trip to Morocco in 2005 (when I learned of this saga for the first time) I committed myself to find a way to bring it to greater public awareness. I thought it would be an easy task. Surprisingly it took 10 long years to find the right setting and venue. But on December 20 the alumni of Kivunim transformed this “secret” into public knowledge. All of the program’s graduates have spent at least 12 days in Morocco and have studied Arabic and Islam along with their studies of Hebrew and the history of the Jewish people throughout the world.

The young men and women presented Kivunim's first Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr./Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel Award to His Majesty, the late King Mohammed V, in the form of an illuminated and calligraphed parchment honoring his legacy. It noted that the Moroccan king "stands for us as a model, who did as Dr. King said and risked his position, prestige, and even life for the welfare of others." And the award cited Rabbi Heschel, who taught to engage in the struggles of the world by responding – choosing to "stand up and confront evil rather than condone it or look away."

In these times of growing violence and hatred, could there be a more important counterpoint than this message of courageous humanity?

Princess Lalla Hasna was visibly moved by the program, which included the Moroccan ambassador to the United States and the Moroccan ambassador to the United Nations as well as leading local rabbis and imams.

The centerpiece of the evening was the remarkable message from King Mohammed VI, delivered by André Azoulay, counselor to the king: "Tonight, you are inviting the Kingdom of Morocco to a date with history," he began. "Indeed, this is one of those events which make history, adding the most beautiful chapters to the book of mankind, who knew in the past and still knows today, how to resist the dizzying impacts of the cultural, religious and social divide."

The king's message spoke of Morocco's diverse society and noted his grand-father's bravery in refusing to allow "the racist laws of the Vichy government to be applied to Moroccan citizens of Jewish faith."

The "exemplary Royal Resistance" was "characteristic of enlightened Islam," he wrote, that was "at its best when its most eminent figures – first and foremost the nation's leader – subscribed to the loftiest, most enlightened elements of human nature."

Addressing the state of the world today, the king noted the need “to stand up more forcefully to the deadly aberrations of those who are hijacking our cultures, our faiths and our civilizations.” At a time when societies are “poisoned” by “regression and archaism,” by modeling ourselves on the “depth and resilience” of King Mohammed V, we can “recover the lost expanses of reason and mutual respect which have vanished from many parts of the world.”

The king said that widespread recognition of his grandfather’s heroism would remind the world “that it was countries like mine, in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world, that rejected Nazi barbarism.” He added that the knowledge “would certainly contribute to greater discernment in the face of growing Islamophobia and gross generalizations that feed on a culture of rejection, exclusion and refusal to learn how to live together.”

It was most gratifying when the king’s message paid tribute to Kivunim as the organization that “brought us together this evening,” and he held out the hope that its students will “better understand our intertwined and unified traditions, paving the way for a different future, for a new, shared destiny full of the promises of history, which, as they will have realized in Morocco, is far from being relegated to the past.”

*Peter A. Geffen is the founder and executive director of Kivunim. He was a civil rights worker for Rev. Martin Luther King in the mid-1960s and is founder of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, hence the name of the award to King Mohammed V, incorporating the names of Rev. King and Rabbi Heschel.*