

Behind The Headlines

Morocco: An Oasis Of Tolerance And Diversity

(NAPSA)—Some may be surprised at the thought of the king of a North African country calling for the restoration of the country's synagogues and acknowledging the country's rich history of cultural diversity.

Yet that was exactly the case recently when Morocco's King Mohammed VI highlighted Morocco's Jewish heritage and reaffirmed his country's commitment to religious freedom and diversity.

His comments came at the restoration ceremony of Slat al Fassiyine Synagogue in Fez. Built in the 17th century, it is the oldest synagogue in Fez, where much of the old city, or medina, has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The synagogue had fallen into disrepair and had been closed since the 1960s. With funding from Morocco's Jewish community and the Federal Republic of Germany, Slat al Fassiyine has now been restored and a ceremony was held to celebrate the completion of the two-year renovation effort.

A Diverse Heritage

In his message, King Mohammed VI highlighted Morocco's diverse cultural heritage: "The Moroccan people's cultural traditions, which are steeped in history, are rooted in our citizens' abiding commitment to the principles of coexistence, tolerance and harmony between the various components of the nation.

"As is enshrined in the Kingdom's new Constitution, the Hebrew heritage is indeed one of the time-honored components of our national identity. For this reason, I wish to call for the restoration of all the synagogues in the other Moroccan cities so that they may serve not only as places of worship, but also as forums for cultural dialogue and for the



AFP PHOTO/FADEL SENNA

Rabbis pray as Jewish and Muslim leaders listen during the inauguration of the Slat al Fassiyine Synagogue in the northern Moroccan city of Fez.

promotion of our cultural values."

The king also said the two-year restoration of the 17th century synagogue bore "eloquent testimony to the spiritual wealth and diversity of the Kingdom of Morocco and its heritage."

A Message of Tolerance

Some 200 people attended the ceremony, including Moroccan Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane, representatives of the German government, and leaders of the Moroccan Jewish community.

Serge Berdugo, president of the Judeo-Moroccan Patrimony Foundation, said that the restoration is a "message of peace and tolerance." "Slat al Fassiyine teaches us a beautiful lesson," he said. "It represented the past, bound to disappear. Its restoration process anticipated the future, and that future is now. Moroccan Judaism's time has come. This community is part of the Moroccan reality."

This information is provided by Beckerman on behalf of the government of Morocco. Further information is available at the U.S. Department of Justice.