

The Mimona Celebration

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Moroccan Jews have celebrated **Mimona** for centuries, and in the last years it is being celebrated by many Israelis, regardless of their origin. Although it is gaining in Popularity in Israel, undesirably, it has evolved into a festival-like event and is losing its original religious character. Nevertheless, it is a joyful celebration that expresses the spirit of the community: joy of life, **Haḥnasat Orḥim** (hospitality), generosity, and a brotherhood sentiment. There are several theories regarding the origin of the **Mimona celebration**, or as it is called by the Spanish-speaking Moroccan Jews- **Noche de Mimona**.

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According to one theory, it had originated in Fez, as the annual commemorating “**Se’uda**” (“Yurtzeit”), honoring Rabbi Yosef Maimon, the father of Maimonides, who passed away in Fez, on the last day of Passover, in 1166. It has been speculated that the traditional **Se’uda** comprising of prayers, religious discourses and dinner, as the custom is until today, changed its nature with time, and has evolved into the Mimona celebration. Thus, the name **Maimon** has evolved into Mimona. (Maimonides was born in 1135, Cordoba, Spain, and passed away in 1204, Fustat, Egypt. The family escaped the Almohades’ persecutions in Spain and settled in Fez, Morocco, from 1159-1169, where he concentrated on his studies in medicine).

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Another thought stems from the similarity between the Hebrew term that means faith-- **Emuna** and the term **Mimona**. According to this, the **Mimona** celebration is an expression of the faith in God and in the redemption of the Jewish people. During the last days of Passover we read “Shirat Hayam”, the passage that commemorates God's miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea and reaffirms the faith in Messianic redemption (“**Az yashir Moshe u-bnei Israel...**”). And indeed, according to the Biblical story, the Israelites marched into the crashing waves, relying on God’s promised miracle. This act required a firm **Emuna** – faith - in God.

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Yet, another theory points out at the relations between **Mimona** and **Mammon** (wealth), which implies prosperity in Aramaic and in Hebrew. This thought has to do with the belief that agricultural abundance and prosperity are determined on the day of **Mimona**. Accordingly, the joyous Mimona is thought to be a celebration of spring and an expression of the optimism it brings along for a successful harvest and abundance in the world. This is the reason for decorating the house with wheat stalk and greens of all kind. Nissan-- the month of **Pessah**, was actually the first month in the Biblical calendar year.

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There are also theories suggesting that the **Mimona** celebration is rooted in local Moroccan socio- cultural customs, rather than having Jewish origins. According to this thought, it is an expression of the tolerance that existed between the Jews and the Berbers, the autochthones Moroccan inhabitants. Indeed, throughout Morocco the local neighbors used to bring trays with **Mufleta** and other cookies to their Jewish neighbors, helping them to celebrate the recommencement of the Hametz-eating.

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Other researchers however, relate **Mimona** to an ancient Berber custom, and claim that it has originated as a celebration intended to pacify the Berber Deity of Good Luck, whose name was **Lala Mimouna**. But, this theory is being rejected vehemently by many individuals of Moroccan origin, who support their rejection with evidence to the contrary.

(Among other researchers who uphold this theory are: Dr. Yigal Bin Nun; a recent book by Dr. Aharon Mamán, to name but two.

דר. אהרן ממן, מרקם לשונות היהודים בצפון אפריקה, מוסד ביאליק והאוניברסיטה העברית, תשע"ד

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One humorous theory has a simple linguistic explanation. **Mona** means sweet roll, in Judeo-Spanish. Since we can start eat bread at the end of Passover, we name it: **Mi Mona** = my sweet roll of bread.

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However, whatever the origin is, it is a joyous celebration, where tables are being set up with symbolic food and sweets, and people go from house to house. Homes were decorated with flowers, wheat stalks, and herbs. One of my mother' favorite was Orange tree branches with blooming flowers (Called: flores

de azahar). According to Rafael Ben Simhon, there was a rigid order in Morocco of who to visit first: It was customary to go first to the home of the **Cohen** and be blessed with **Birkat Hacohanim**, then to the rabbi, following by the elders, the notable, and then to family and friends (<http://moreshet-morocco.com/?p=40696>)

Each guest, whether familiar or stranger, is encouraged to enjoy the sweets on the table, and being welcome with the traditional greeting:

**Tirbeḥu Utis'adu** (success and good luck in Judeo Moroccan), and the Spanish-speaking greet everyone with: “**A Mimon, a Shalom, a baba Terbah**” .

The celebration at one's home always starts with the **Havdala Le Motzaei Yom Tov**. This one is by Dr. Dahan the Rabbi of the synagogue in Manaus, Brazil, whose congregates are descendants of the Moroccan Jews who fleeing from the poverty and persecutions in Morocco, went to Brazil and developed the cauchuk (rubber) industry more than 150 years ago. Amazingly, the melody is identical to the one my father, born in Fez, used to recite. And according to our friend, Dr. Arie Maman, it is the same as in Mequinez as well.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaKcLNbAPoo>)

### **About the Mufleta / mofleta**

Mufleta or Mofleta is the name by which most of the Moroccan Jews call the flattened round crepe, filled with butter and honey, with which the hametz – eating starts at the Mimona. Terit is how the Jews in Northern Morocco call it, which is a Berber word. A while ago I came upon a Sandwich originated in Sicily, made of flattened round bread filled with Sausage and cheese that is called Mufulletta or Muffaletta. I found the resemblance to be striking. I was wondering if both names have the same etymology. In the encyclopedia of Jewish food it is said that the Jews who fled to Morocco after the expulsion brought with them the mufleta. But, this has to be further researched, since I have not found any other source confirming this “import”. It is added though, that the word is related to the “pain Mouflet” –a medieval Provincial word for soften round bread, cooked on a flat griddle. Our Mufleta, used to be cooked in Morocco on a flat pan made of clay, called makalá. My mother used to flip the pan upside down and prepare the

mufleta on its flat bottom. In Miriam Webster dictionary a relation is mentioned to Muffula, which means a fur mitten. Another source speculates that Mufleta and Mouflet may go back to Late Latin. In Spanish however, mofletes means puffy cheeks. All are associated than, with bread or items of soft, puffy and round. From this, is it possible that the Jewish Mufleta and the Sicilian Muffuletta may have the same etymological source? Their shape is similar—soft, flattened and round. And both are eaten with filling, though distinct. Our Mufleta is filled with honey and butter, and the Muffuletta with cheese and sausage. But if this is the case, why do the Jews from Northern Morocco, who speak Spanish, call the mufleta by its Berber (arabic?) name—Terit?

In Arabic, "مفلطح" mufaltaḥ means to flatten. Is it possible than, that the Arabic 'mufaltaḥ' and the Latin variation of Mofletes - Muflete - muffula - muffuletta are related?

To be further researched.

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The traditional symbolic food on the Mimona table

♣♣♣♣ Flour, milk or buttermilk, and honey -- allude to Eretz Israel and to purity.

♣♣♣♣ Assortment of cookies made of almonds and nuts symbolize joy and abundance.

♣♣♣♣ Eggs, bean pods, and various greens -- symbolize fertility and prosperity.

♣♣♣♣ Wheat stalks -- referring to "**kol Israel 'arevim ze la ze**" and to brotherhood sentiment in general.

♣♣♣♣ Dates -- refer to righteousness (**Tzadik ka Tamar**)

♣♣♣♣ Assortment of caramelized fruits and preserves for a sweet year.

♣♣♣♣ Fish for good luck.

♣♣♣♣ **Mufleta** (the traditional crepe), spread with butter and honey, and rolled into a cylinder -- a symbol for a sweet start of hametz-eating, and for thereafter.



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