Mapping Moral Paths:
The Spiritual Geography of Moroccan Rabbi Gabriel Elgrabli

by *Aviad Moreno*

Abstract

This essay offers a new reading of narratives of Jewish migration from the MENA region drawing on the preface to Tumat Yesharim (Jerusalem, 1989), a biblical exegesis by Rabbi Gabriel Elgrabli (spelled Eli-Qrabli). A Moroccan-born adherent of the (Anti-Zionist) Lithuanian Haredi Musar movement, Elgrabli engaged deeply with a tradition that emphasized ethical self-discipline. Composed in Israel of the 1980s, his autobiographical narrative charts a spiritual journey from Meknes to Jerusalem—through Europe and the Americas—in contrast to the singular path to the Holy Land that is often affirmed. As I argue, Elgrabli's writing resists both Zionist cartographies that privilege Israel as an endpoint and the inward-facing, self-isolating path to perfection that the Musar model promotes. Instead, his journey exemplifies a diasporic spirituality rooted in displacement, divine providence, and ethical calling—a cartography animated not by destination but by personal transformation and ability to become a moral compass for the Sephardi grassroots. By weaving together Sephardi memory, Musar discipline, and geographic multiplicity, Elgrabli offers a unique model of mental maps. His account challenges dominant narratives of origin and return, presenting instead a layered map of spiritual becoming—rather than homecoming.

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Introduction*

> With the advent of Zionism and the moral deterioration that began to
> surge through the [Jewish] nation [as a result], I decided to travel to the
> Holy Land...[1]

Rabbi Gabriel Elgrabli's epigram, quoted from his preface to *Tumat Yesharim*
(Jerusalem: 1989), a commentary on the Pentateuch, serve as a gateway to an
intricate exploration of the inherent religious dimensions of the journeys and
landmarks of Moroccan Jewry's emigration to Israel. As a Moroccan-Jewish
adherent of the anti-Zionist, Lithuanian Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Musar
movement, Elgrabli's narrative inherently challenges entrenched assumptions
about Jewish migration motives and the dominant national narrative of *'aliyah* (lit.
"ascent" = Jewish immigration to Israel), which frames this act as an epic collective
return to the Promised Land.

However, as I argue in this study, Elgrabli's recounted journey from Morocco to
Jerusalem goes well beyond critiquing Zionist cartographies. As a hybrid religious
figure, he reclaims legitimacy by portraying multilayered geographies of lived,
divinely guided experience. His account becomes a creative act of self-formation—
a fusion of fragmented religious traditions into a coherent mental map shaped by
a distinctive Haredi imaginary with a Moroccan twist. To better understand how

[1] Rabbi Gabriel Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim* (Jerusalem: Unknown publisher, 1989), 2.

his narrative departs from conventional frameworks, the next section surveys dominant models of Jewish mobility and sacred geography. This will lay the groundwork for analyzing the affective and theological meanings attached to space in Elgrabli's writing and in the broader Haredi discourse.

Conventional Mental Maps of Jewish Migration

From the nineteenth century on, narratives of Jewish migration that saw 'aliyah as chiefly a spiritual act acquired a new perspective that was both secularized and nationalized. Zionism, the new Jewish ideology of the nineteenth century, first advocated by the Ḥoveve Tsiyon movement—forerunners of the wave of immigration known in Zionism as the First 'Aliyah—emphasized the religious and messianic significance of settling the Land of Israel by working its soil. The principal aim of this new ideology was to recast the identity of the "exilic Jew," who had ostensibly focused his aspiration for emancipation solely on spiritual and ritual religious life, by reinstating the identity of the "biblical Jew," who holistically combines the spiritual and material in their religion.[2]

Thus, coupled with the emerging ideologies of Jewish renewal, 'aliyah was perceived in Zionism not just as a spiritual ascent or pilgrimage but also as a viable ultimate "solution" to the "Jewish Question," that is, the underlying reasons for the physical persecution of the Jews in exile. In the field of Jewish studies, the dominant historical framework from the nineteenth century onward has explained the migration of Jews, particularly from Eastern Europe to the United States, as a movement away from oppression in their lands of residence and toward salvation in their new and modern emancipatory homelands.[3] Similarly, scholars who have studied the migration of Jews from Muslim lands have focused on the broad processes of decolonization that swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region after World War II, resulting in the establishment of ostensibly oppressive Islamic nation-states—a key contributing factor in the decline in these

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[2] Amir Mashiach, "Redemption, Settlement, and Agriculture in the Religious Teachings of Hovevei Zion," *HTS Teologiese Studies—Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.4102/HTS.V77I4.6516; Menachem Keren-Kratz, "Satmar and Neturei Karta: Jews against Zionism," *Modern Judaism* 43 (2023): 52-53.

[3] Scott Ury, "Migration as Redemption: The Myth and Memory of Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe to the New World," *Jewish Culture and History* 20, no. 1 (2019): 6.

Jewish communities' living conditions that helped spur their subsequent emigration from these home countries.[4]

Powered by the mainstream Zionist nationalist conception of migration, these communities' mass 'aliyah was often facilitated by active "rescue operations" led by Israel. In this telling, persecution of Jews in exile was perceived as a logical meta-account that explains their collective motivation to leave. Curiously, these meta-accounts and concepts that portrayed migration as a meta-historical phenomenon, encapsulating entire histories of nations and communities as they did so, often employed "botanical" metaphors to articulate the intricate relationship among nations, earthly space, and mobility. Migration was frequently rationalized by metaphorically "uprooting" entire communities from their "places of origin" and then symbolically "replanting" them in new national soil.[5] Such conceptions were often embedded in sketches of all-inclusive geopolitical maps that depicted unidirectional "mass" population movements from the one region to another—"Muslim lands" to the Land of Israel in the case at hand.

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[4] See, for example, Ya'akov Meron, "Why Jews Fled the Arab Countries," *Middle East Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1995): 47-55; Malka Hillel Shulewitz, *The Forgotten Millions: The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Lands* (London: Cassell, 1999); Levana Zamir, *The Golden Era of "the Jews of Egypt" and the Mediterranean Option for a United Middle East* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2008); Lyn Julius, *Uprooted: How 3,000 Years of Jewish Civilisation in the Arab World Vanished Overnight* (Elstree, Hertfordshire, UK: Vallentine Mitchell, 2018).

[5] Aviad Moreno, "Hisul, ʿakirah, hagirah: Ha-semantika shel ha-'aliyot' me-artzot 'Arav ba-siaḥ ha-akademi ve-ha-tziburi be-Yisrael" [The Semantics of Jewish Migration from Arab Countries in Israel's Academic and Popular Discourses], *Zion Quarterly* 95 (2020): 107-125 [in Hebrew].
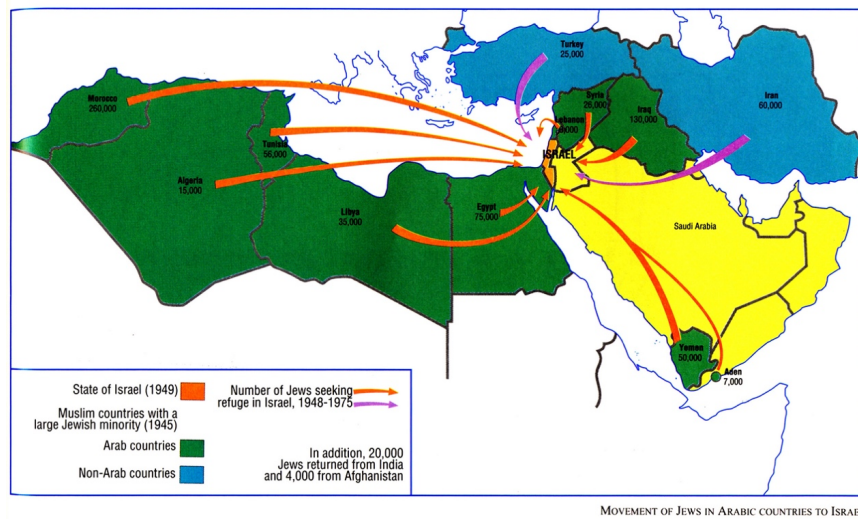
Fig. 1. Geopolitical map of "Movement of Jews in Arabic Countries to Israel",
https://commons.princeton.edu/mg/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MG-
Movement_of_Jews_in_Arabic_Countries_to_Israel.jpg.

The conventional style of migration portrayal aligns well with common rationalizations in the broader field of migration literature, at least since the late nineteenth century, when Ernest George Ravenstein formulated his Laws of Migration. The prevailing perspective in this method centered on the impact of regional economic disparities as the fundamental determinants of migration. A dominant *neoclassical* economic theory rationalized migration by tracing it to *push* and *pull* factors. In recent decades, however, this meta-view has faced substantial criticism due to its narrow focus on economic rationality. A migration-systems theory, for example, has emerged as a more comprehensive framework, surpassing its predecessors, which were based on simple economic considerations, by also taking account of social and cultural factors such as social networks and institutions that may shape seemingly "irrational" migration decisions.[6]

Against the backdrop of growing criticism of monolithic national meta-narratives of migration motivations, a wide range of scholars of MENA Jewish migration have pointed at more nuanced rationalizations of emigration in each community and time period across the MENA region and beyond, paying particular attention

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[6] Karen O'Reilly, "Migration Theories: A Critical Overview," in *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies,* ed. Anna Triandafyllidou (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 4-6, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003194316-2.

to historical and regional contexts as well as to more personal motives.[7] The conceptual shift away from "flat" depictions of migration largely paralleled fundamental changes in geographers' perspective on the relationship between space and human mobility or, to be more precise, how space and mobility are experienced and narrated by migrants in real time as well as in retrospect.

Motion and Emotion

In the 1990s in particular, notable scholars such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Henry Lefebvre began to recognize the inherent constraints of conceptualizing geography solely as a two-dimensional canvas against which intricate tapestries of historical occurrences unravel.[8] Increased attention to the constructed, imagined, and dynamic natures of geographical settings led to the emergence of new categorizations. Prominent among them are the categories of *space* and *place*: While *space* depicts the absolute, physical, and tangible aspects of land, *place* pertains critically to the *intangible emotional* and *cultural* dimensions that attach subjective meanings to specific loci on the ground. By its very nature, therefore, place, according to this approach, is a dynamic construct of the human imagination.[9]

The *spatial turn*, as academics christened this new approach, was part of a broader academic shift within the humanities that reflected the increasing scholarly awareness of the dynamic nature of culture and language as they shape, rather than

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[7] For example, Piera Rossetto, "'On pensait revenir à la fin de l'été': Le départ des Juifs de Libye en 1967, entre rupture et continuité," *Diasporas* (Toulouse) 27 (2016): 95-104, https://doi.org/10.4000/diasporas.450; Aviad Moreno, "Beyond the Nation-State: A Network Analysis of Jewish Emigration from Northern Morocco to Israel," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52 (February 2020): 1-21; Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, "Yemen, Aden and Ethiopia: Jewish Emigration and Italian Colonialism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19, no. 4 (2009): 415-426, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186309990034; Menashe Anzi, "Yemenite Jews in the Red Sea Trade and the Development of a New Diaspora," *Northeast African Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 79-100, https://doi.org/10.14321/nortafristud.17.1.0079.

[8] See works cited by David J. Bodenhamer, "Narrating Space and Place," in *Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives,* eds. David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan and Trevor M. Harris (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 7-26.

[9] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Thomas F. Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 465 and 476.

merely represent, human history. [10] This evolving critical discourse also reconfigured fundamental concepts in our understanding of the complexities of human migration. Consequently, the conventional dichotomy of *moving* and *staying*, once a central point of departure, has been supplanted by more nuanced perspectives on time–space trajectories, including dynamic life-paths and experiences among other factors.[11]

Relatedly, an *emotional turn* in the humanities has dictated that the significance of emotions in shaping dynamic human experiences and human interpretations of the world be rigorously explored rather than simply analyzed through a biological lens. [12] In migration studies, the emotional turn provides another valuable framework within which the journeys of migrants may be comprehended not only as physical movements but also as profoundly emotional experiences that may even align with spiritual awakening.[13] In this regard, the emotional turn also plays a significant role in understanding how migrants retrospectively recollect, narrate, and reimagine their past trajectories and geographies for social and cultural aims.[14]

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[10] Barbara E. Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 19-20.

[11] Gunnar Malmberg, "Time and Space in International Migration," in *International Migration, Immobility and Development: Multidisciplinary Perspectives,* eds. Grete Brochmann, Kristof Tamas, Thomas Faist and Tomas Hammar (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 21-48. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003136125-2.

[12] Stephanie Olsen and Rob Boddice, "Styling Emotions History," *Journal of Social History* 51, no. 3 (2018): 476. Building on this turn, Ben Prestel, for example, underscores the significance of collective emotional experiences in shaping the social and cultural dynamics of urban environments: Joseph Ben Prestel, *Emotional Cities: Debates on Urban Change in Berlin and Cairo, 1860–1910* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 476.

[13] Amalia Campos-Delgado, "Emotional Geographies of Irregular Transmigrants' Journeys," *Migration Studies* 9, no. 2 (2021): 179-195, https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnz029; Johara Berriane, "Religion in Spaces of Transit: African Christian Migrant Churches and Transnational Mobility in Morocco," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 41, no. 4 (2020): 424-441, https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2020.1778653

[14] Nancy Foner, "Migration, Location and Memory: Jewish History through a Comparative Lens," *Jewish Culture and History* 9, no. 2-3 (2007): 150-162, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2007.10512082; Anastasia Christou, "Narrations of the Nation in Mobility Life Stories: Gendered Scripts, Emotional Spheres, and Transnational Performativity in the Greek Diaspora," in *Gendering Nationalism: Intersections of Nation, Gender, and Sexuality in the 21st Century,* eds. Jon Mulholland, Nicola Montagna and Erin Sanders-McDonagh (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 299-314. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76699-7_16

Thomas DeGloma's examination of *narratives of awakening* provides a complementary perspective that may enrich the analysis of the case studied here. In his study, which underscores the interplay between individual and collective memories, he posits that personal, *transformative journeys* articulated within spiritual or religious frameworks contribute significantly to shaping a community's identity and sense of belonging. DeGloma's concept of narratives of awakening suggests that stories about mobility constitute a crucial medium with which moral concerns may be expressed. They give individuals a structured framework that helps them navigate between "right" and "wrong" and between "justice" and "injustice" through imagined spaces. [15] The sharing of such narratives—even in retrospect, several decades after the recounted events occurred—enables individuals such as those in Haredi communities to position themselves as role models who inspire others to adopt a similar worldview.

The approach championed by DeGloma, as I would argue, is instrumental in understanding Elgrabli's narrative about his retrospective retelling of his spiritual odyssey —marked by a transformation from a state of "falsehood" to one of "truth"—as he recounts his departure from Morocco and his subsequent voyage through an imagined geography.

Leveraging the theories and ideas discussed above, below I explore the emotional odyssey of a Jewish migrant from Morocco to Israel and the related "mental maps" elicited by his emotional reflections on that journey. To be sure, the emphasis here is not on tracing the decisions that ultimately led him to migrate but rather on unraveling the personal narrative behind his motivation to migrate. Thus, the analysis unveils a distinct cognitive division of space that challenges the conventional geographic dichotomy of "origin" and "destination" communities as commonly described in popular accounts of Jewish migration to Israel.

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[15] Thomas DeGloma, "Toward a Cultural and Cognitive Sociology of Autobiography," *Sociological Theory* 33, no. 1 (2015): 3-4, 13.

The Case Study and its Historical Background

Tumat Yesharim, a commentary on the Pentateuch divided into weekly portions, authored by Rabbi Gabriel Elgrabli in 1989 in Jerusalem after he had settled in Israel, provides important insight for my analytical approach.

Elgrabli traversed a rich tapestry of locales in his odyssey, finding profound spiritual significance in each. From his birthplace in Meknes, Morocco, a city steeped in Jewish religious tradition, he journeyed to Marseille, France, initially landing in a Zionist training camp before finding refuge at the Novaredok yeshiva in Fublaines, near Paris. From there, he traveled to New York and, after a short sojourn, took off for Buenos Aires after having been offered a position as a ritual slaughterer and a promise of a match for marriage. Unfortunately, his connection flight through Caracas, Venezuela, ended in a catastrophic crash that he somehow survived. Requiring medical care, however, he endured a hospital stay in Montevideo, Uruguay, where his miraculous survival made him a media sensation. Intent in continuing carrying out his assignment, he traveled to Buenos Aires, where he found purpose in his work and embraced his Sephardi roots. His subsequent return to Morocco illustrated his commitment to the needs of his hometown community, where he embraced his mentorship roles by teaching at the Talmud Torah (boys' religious school) of Wazan and supervising inspection of the Jewish dietary laws in Casablanca. Ultimately, his journey culminated in his arrival in Jerusalem, a deliberate choice that reflected his deep spiritual connection with the heartland of Judaism. Elgrabli's unwavering faith throughout his travels transcended geopolitical boundaries and linear movements, thus guiding him toward enlightenment and leadership, while his experiences shaped his understanding of the divine presence in his life.

To be sure, much of the account of Elgrabli's meanderings in *Tumat Yesharim* reflects the author's early embrace of the Jewish Musar Movement, in which he imbibed the teachings of Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horowitz, the "Alter [Elder] of Novaredok." In its quest for ethical perfection, the Musar Movement, rooted in Lithuania, dedicated itself to a form of Torah study that deemed the Talmud to be too "rational" and, therefore, unable to generate a deep, emotional attachment to Jewish spirituality. The movement emphasized instead ethical and moral

pedagogy, with a specific focus on character development and perfection of personal virtues. Although it shared the emphasis on emotions and criticism of Talmudic studies with Hasidism—another mystical Jewish current that swept through Eastern Europe from the eighteenth century onward partly in response to Jewish enlightenment and modernization—the two groups otherwise espoused essentially opposing views.[16]

The Musar Movement aligned with a wider Haredi opposition to Zionism and the national 'aliyah project, promoted by organizations such as Agudas Yisroel, which had been established in Kattowitz (Katowice) in 1912 to counter the Religious Zionism trend led by the Mizrachi Movement. Key tenets of the Haredi opposition include the belief that the return to the Land of Israel should be driven by religious motives alone rather than nationalistic ideas and the conviction that establishing a Jewish state before the advent of the Jewish Messiah contravenes the divine will.[17]

Interestingly, these developments in European Jewish history had more than a local influence in the modern era; they were grounded in much broader political, demographic, and cultural shifts that swept the Jewish world and manifested in various forms. In nineteenth-century France, for instance, prevailing narratives of solidarity between European and "Oriental" Jewries, such as those propagated by the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), divided the Jewish world between distressed collectives facing anti-Jewish persecution and developed ones responsible for the well-being of their afflicted brethren.

In the post-World War II era, as Israel and the Americas emerged as the demographic and cultural foci of world Jewry, the American Jewries assumed responsibility for newly distressed fellows, including those in Israel as in need of extensive external support. This hierarchical perception of the Jewish world prompted efforts by American organizations such as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee ("the Joint") to facilitate the migration of Jews, Zionist or not, from MENA countries

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[16] Clemence Boulouque, "Abraham Unbound: The Prefiguration of the Unconscious in the First Generation of the Musar and Hasidic Movements," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 14, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1163/1872471x-bja10015.

[17] Keren-Kratz, "Satmar and Neturei Karta," 52-76.

to Israel and the West.[18] In 1948–1968 specifically, more than 70 percent of Jews who migrated from Asian and African countries chose Israel as their destination.[19] By the early 1970s, approximately 80 percent of the 300,000 Jews who resided in Morocco in 1948 had immigrated to Israel in two main waves: about 160,000 from 1948 to 1956 and another 113,000 from 1961 to 1971.[20]

While Elgrabli's journey out of Morocco should be framed within the broader context of the mass departure of Moroccan Jews during the 1950s and 1960s, his retrospective narrative should also be considered in light of the infiltration of European Haredi ideas into his native Morocco. After its founding in 1912 in Kattowitz, Agudas Yisroel developed a Haredi version of the "civilizing mission," aiming to "rescue" Jews in Islamic lands—especially in areas influenced by the AIU—from secular modernity. Rooted in the belief that only European Orthodoxy could withstand Western secularism, this mission reshaped Torah education, lifestyle, and dress in line with Ashkenazi norms.[21]

Despite the transnational aspirations of the Orthodox counter-modernization project, the Haredization of Jewish communities in the MENA region was far from uniform. In some places, efforts to reshape local Jewish life in line with European Haredi norms encountered significant resistance from entrenched communal structures and cultural sensibilities. The Orthodox ideological system often struggled to fully adapt to the sociopolitical and religious dynamics of MENA societies, where the authority of local sages (*hakhamim*) and communal leaders remained strong. In particular, many communities refused to accept the Ashkenazi Orthodox notion of halakhic exclusivity, which tended to reject alternative religious traditions as illegitimate. The result was a fragmented map of receptivity and resistance, where Orthodox institutions such as Agudas Yisroel or

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[18] Aviad Moreno, *Entwined Homelands, Empowered Diasporas: Hispanic Moroccan Jews and Their Globalizing Community* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2024), 93-94.

[19] Sergio Della Pergola, "Sephardic and Oriental Jews in Israel and Western Countries: Migration, Social Change, and Identification," in *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahi Jews vol. XXII*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12-14.

[20] Michael Laskier, *Israel and Aliyah from North Africa 1948–1970* (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, 2006), 523-524 [in Hebrew]; Yaron Tsur, *A Torn Community: The Jews of Morocco and Nationalism 1943–1954* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2002), 23 [in Hebrew].

[21] Yaacov Loupo, *Metamorphose Ultra-Orthodoxe Chez Les Juifs Du Maroc* (Paris: Harmattan, 2012), 34, 80-87, 90-104, and 112.

emissaries like Rabbi Halperin found more fertile ground in some cities than others.[22]

In Meknes, Elgrabli's birthplace, Haredi education expanded through the joint efforts of Eliezer Berdugo and Rabbi Ze'ev Wolf Halperin, an Agudas Yisroel emissary. United by concern over the secularizing effects of French colonialism and the AIU's influence, they established in 1912 the Em ha-Banim school network as an Orthodox alternative. In just one year, the community built a twenty-five-classroom school, thanks to grassroots fundraising led by Rebecca Toledano and other local women. The school combined Torah and Hebrew instruction with French-language secular studies to prepare students for life under colonial rule.[23]

After World War II, Haredi proselytizing movements—particularly New York's Chabad Lubavitch and elements of the Lithuanian yeshiva world—actively recruited Moroccan students, contributing to the formation of a transnational network of Moroccan yeshiva students abroad. In France, prominent Haredi yeshivot such as Bet Yosef in Fublaines (near Paris) and Hakhme Tsarfat in Aix-les-Bains (near Lyon and Geneva) actively enrolled numerous youths from Morocco. The yeshiva in Fublaines attracted a student body whose members, mainly aged twelve and over, followed the Novaredok ethicist method. Among Moroccan Jews, however, to whom the Novaredok method was generally less appealing, the students at the yeshiva in Fublaines were exceptions. In Rancy, located near the French–Swiss border, a "Torah center" was founded in 1967 by rabbis of Moroccan origin, notably the Toledano family of Meknes. Rabbi Baruch Raphael Toledano, the paterfamilias, played a key role in the establishment of the yeshiva, drawing on connections from his studies in Gateshead, England.[24]

Starting in the immediate post-war period and continuing for about the next four decades, Jewish emigrants from Morocco also migrated to the UK. In this migratory wave, Moroccan students arrived to pursue their studies in Orthodox

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[22] Nissim Leon, *Harediyut raka: Hithadshut datit be-Yahadut ha-Mizrah be-Yisra'el* [Soft Ultra-Orthodoxy: Religious Renewal in Oriental Jewry in Israel] (Yerushalayim: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 2010), 25-27 [in Hebrew].

[23] Ibid.; Eliezer Bashan, "Hevrat Em ha-Banim be-Maroqo," in *Isha ba-Mizrah, Isha mi-Mizrah,* eds. Tova Cohen and Shaul Regev (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2005), 128-139 [in Hebrew].

[24] Itzhak Dahan, *From the Maghreb to the West: Moroccan Jews among Three Continents* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2022), 40-41 [in Hebrew].

yeshivas and other educational institutions across England, predominantly in yeshivot like Torat Emet and Etz Chaim in London, Netzach Yisrael in Sunderland in Northeast England, and Yeshivat Bet Yosef in Gateshead, which Itzhak Dahan describes as the Harvard of the Haredi world in Europe.[25] However, because most Jewish institutions in Morocco were Francophone due to their operations under the French protectorate, most students from Morocco found yeshivas in France more attractive than those in the UK. Rabbi Aharon Monsonego, the pioneer Moroccan student at Aix-les-Bains in 1946, played a significant role in populating these yeshivot in the 1960s and 1970s by actively facilitating the recruitment of students for yeshivot in Europe, with particular emphasis on Aix-les-Bains. From the 1950s to the 1980s, around 4,000 of the estimated 5,000 youth from Morocco who migrated to these Haredi institutions chose Aix-les-Bains.[26]

Israeli Sephardi Haredism

Given that Elgrabli's book was written in Jerusalem in the late 1980s, it must be also read in the context of the post-1948 evolution of Israeli Haredi society. Since then, most of Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox society had continued to adhere to the pre-state Agudas Yisroel (pronounced Agudat Yisrael in modern Israeli Hebrew) approach of accommodating Zionism, balancing ideological wariness with strategic engagement. While upholding the traditional Haredi view of the secular Jewish state lacked as devoid of theological legitimacy, leading figures such as Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz ("the Hazon Ish") proposed a subtle reorientation: rather than outright anti-Zionism, Haredim in Israel should aspire to create an enclave culture fortified by formerly East European yeshivot as "the caves and deserts of our generation," and Torah study as the true enabler of Jewish survival.

This idea, later institutionalized in the concept of a "society of learners" (*hevrat lomdim*), treated the state as a means to an end or an instrument of Divine providence, lacking theological legitimacy, for rebuilding Torah.[27] In other

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[25] Ibid., 217.
[26] Ibid., 65-66.
[27] Ibid., 213-215.

words, the Haredi mainstream in Israel gradually accepted the state as a practical framework within which Torah life could flourish—ushering in what scholars such as Benjamin Brown term "ex post facto" legitimacy.[28]

Tactical political participation by Agudat Yisrael in Israel's first government coalition, however, was short-lived. In part, this was due to the movement's own modestly successful efforts in enrolling children of Yemenite migrants to Israel in 1949–1950 in what would soon become its own independent school system and in leading yeshivot. The party's return to a coalition presence, in Menachem Begin's Likud-led government in 1977, was emulated by the Shas Party in 1984 to secure religious autonomy for the Sephardi-Haredi population while maintaining ideological distance from Zionism. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the party's leader, offered a distinct form of pragmatism: while rejecting the state's redemptive status (*athalta de-ge'ula*) as affirmed by the National Religious, he saw it as a vehicle to elevate Sephardi Torah culture. [29] Despite opposition from Ashkenazi leaders such as Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach—who dismissed Zionism as a failed modern project while also suspicious of attempts by "Torah true" (viz. Haredi) Sephardi attempts to enter politics on a national level—Shas carved out a middle path, upholding Torah authority while engaging the state in practical terms.[30]

Meanwhile, in Israeli yeshivot, "Lithuanian Sephardim" inspired by the example of Yemenite recruits back in the 1950s had also internalized the yeshiva-centered worldview and the strict behavioral codes of Ashkenazi Haredi society, even as they remained marginalized and excluded from its leadership and social prestige.[31] By the early 1980s, resentment over this exclusion combined with spiritual revivalism generated a grassroots movement seeking to "restore the crown to its

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[28] Benjamin Brown, *Trembling at the Word of the People: Haredi Critique of Israeli Democracy* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2012), 40-41.

[29] Nissim Leon, *Harediyut raka*, 22-29; Yaacov Lupo, *Shas de-Lita: ha-hishtaltut ha-Lita'it 'al talmide ha-yeshivot ha-Marokayim* [Shas of Lithuania: The Lithuanian takeover of Torah scholars from Morocco] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), chap. 3.

[30] Benny Brown, *Madrikh la-hevra ha-Haredit* [A guide to haredi society: beliefs and sectors] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001), 217-220.

[31] Benny Brown, " 'From a Negligible Minority to a Rising Force': Three Formative Events in Post-1977 Haredi History," in *New Trends in the Study of Haredi Culture and Society*, ed. David N. Myers, and Nechumi Yaffe (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2023), 179-202; Brown, *Madrikh la-hevra ha-Haredit*, 122-123; Nissim Leon, "The Ethnic Structuring of 'Sephardim' in Haredi Society in Israel," *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 1 (2016): 130-160.

past glory" (*le-hahzir atara le-yoshna*)—a slogan that guided the creation of an independent pan-Sephardi Haredi network of institutions represented politically by Shas.[32] Under the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef—himself a product of the Sephardi Haredi Porat Yosef yeshiva yet critically engaged with halakhic discourse and norms due to his own highly successful three-decade career in the Israeli rabbinate—Shas adopted the norms of Haredi Judaism while projecting a uniquely Sephardi halakhic and cultural voice.[33]

Sociologically, the emergent Sephardi Haredi sector differed from its Ashkenazi counterpart by remaining more socially inclusive of deviance from Halakhic norms. While Ashkenazi Haredim often formed insular, endogamous communities, Sephardi ultra-Orthodoxy maintained ties with the broader MENA Jewish public and offered a "soft" brand of ultra-Orthodoxy of rabbinic and yeshiva elites committed to religious stringency but more flexible in communicative style and culturally resonant with traditionalist non-Haredi Jews. This development, as Nissim Leon argues, should not be seen merely as an imitation of Ashkenazi Orthodoxy but as a contextualized response to the dislocation and marginalization experienced by immigrants from Muslim countries in Israel.[34]

Despite these broader developments that shaped the emergence of Sephardi Haredism in Israel, Elgrabli's writing stands out as a deeply personal act of ideological mediation that provides this overall trend with a unique twist. His narrative reflects a conscious spiritual synthesis crafted from diverse and often conflicting sources of authority and inspiration. As his odyssey unfolds globally—from Meknes to Europe, the Americas, and finally Jerusalem—Elgrabli constructs a religious identity that is at rooted in traditional Sephardi pietism and religiosity yet also "upgraded" by exposure to the Musar-infiltrated Lithuanian yeshivot that were already striking roots in Morocco. If one may judge by his text, Elgrabli is neither a typical "Novaredoker," nor a direct disciple of either the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Rabbi Shach or the latter Sephardi counterpart turned antagonist, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Ovadia Yosef praised Elgrabli's work for its ability to "lezakot

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[32] Leon, *Harediyut raka,* 22-29.

[33] Brown, "From a Negligible Minority," 190-192; Nissim Leon, "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the Shas Party, and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 3 (2015): 379-395.

[34] Leon, *Harediyut raka,* 35-40; Leon, "The Ethnic Structuring," 138-140.

et ha-rabbim," or to bring merit to the public —a quality aligned with his broader philosophy of Shas's religious activism.[35] Yet, paradoxically, he is embraced for similar reasons by the most extreme elements of Jerusalem's Haredi world, including Rabbi Moshe Halberstam of the Eda Haharedit, a leading figure in the ultra-radical anti-Zionist Ashkenazi world, whose approbations were typically reserved for those deemed unassailably pious and ideologically pure.[36] In his endorsement he refers to him in a similar manner as one who brings merit to the public. Among those who endorsed him are also Rabbi Shalom Messas, who represented a moderate Moroccan tradition rooted in communal leadership and halakhic leniency where appropriate[37]; and the inclusion of Rabbi Yehuda Yosef and the Sephardi rabbinical court of the Eda Haharedit—an enclave that has historically distanced itself from both Shas and the Zionist rabbinate—further underscores the unusual breadth of rabbinic legitimacy that Elgrabli was able to cultivate.[38]

Most notably, Elgrabli's distinctiveness and unique contribution are represented in his ability to reframe the elitist and self-isolating Musar tradition for a broader audience. Drawing on the Novaredok tradition's emphasis on ethical self-cultivation, he is seemingly perceived as one who brings Musar to the people—transforming a discipline once reserved for elite yeshiva students into a spiritually resonant message for wider Sephardi communities. As I show in this study, this identity is reclaimed by Elgrabli to shape geographical metaphors of mobility and space.

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[35] Nissim Leon, "'Zikui ha-rabbim': Ovadia Yosef's Approach toward Religious Activism and His Place in the Haredi Movement within Mizrahi Jewry," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 22 (2007): 150-168; Leon, "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef," 379-395.

[36] Menachem Friedman, "The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society—Sources, Trends and Processes," in *The Jewish Communities of Israel: Transition and Change*, eds. Ezra Kopelowitz and Raymond C. Rosen (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1991), 169-170.

[37] Zvi Zohar, "The Sephardic Halakhic Tradition in the 20th Century," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 22 (2007): 130.

[38] Leon, *Harediyut raka*, 45–46; Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 221-222.

Between the Personal and the Communal

The Point of Departure

Elgrabli's narrative begins by affirming the merits of his hometown:

> I was born in the city of Meknes, a city of sages and scribes. They say about the [biblical] verse "From Zion the Torah will go forth" that [it actually means]: from Meknes the Torah will reach all of Morocco and its surroundings. All who sought the crown of Torah would bring their sons to Meknes, because there were the yeshivot in which they study God's Torah day and night.[39]

In this opening statement, Elgrabli portrays his birthplace as a spiritual epicenter renowned for its religious scholarship, imbuing its geographic space with profound dedication to learning and interpretation of the Torah.[40] Continuing to infuse the narrative with personal connections, the rabbi associates the landscape with his own religious upbringing, highlighting individuals who played pivotal roles in the childhood stage of his spiritual journey.

From its inception, Elgrabli's narrative repeatedly intertwines his personal, biographical growth with his spiritual advancement, as a Jew from Meknes. Describing his bar-mitzva celebration, he elaborates on the local custom at large: "In the evening, they would rent a large car and all the children of the family, as well as all the friends, would drive around the city to make the bar-mitzva boy happy."[41] This vivid account of his bar-mitzva, a significant rite of passage in Jewish tradition celebrated at the age of thirteen, marks much more than a tell of a regular transition from childhood to adulthood. In *Tumat Yesharim*, this tale is recounted in order to portray Meknes as a bastion of piety—a spiritual point of origin where such celebrations are treated with profound reverence, thereby

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[39] Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim*, 1.

[40] This study often involves detailed examination of the text, its laws, and its ethical teachings, as well as commentary from scholars. It's a central practice in Jewish religious and intellectual life.

[41] Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim*, 1.

reinforcing Elgrabli's authority as a hybrid scholar capable of bridging disparate, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, religious worlds.[42]

Missing in these depictions and others, however, is a detailed portrayal of the cityscape; it does not mention any actual street names, specific sites, or even the Jewish neighborhood, the *mellah*, which is most likely the epicenter of the narrative. It also overlooks the significant demographic shifts and the dramatic changes in interfaith relations that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, which seem irrelevant to the self-fashioned spiritual landscape Elgrabli constructs.[43]
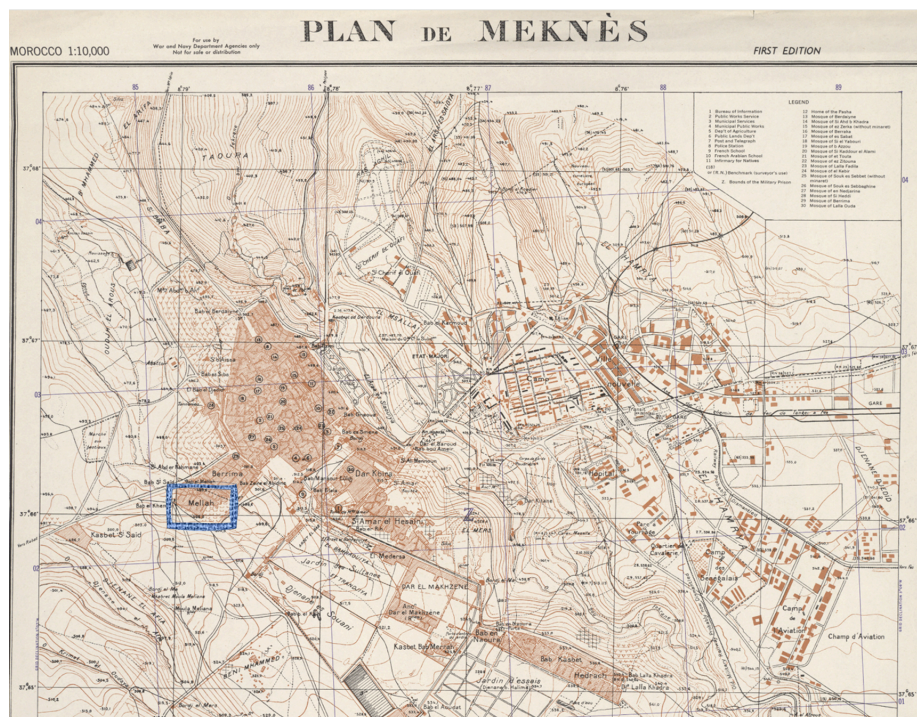

Fig. 2. The Mellah of Meknes within the greater cityscape,
https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/morocco_city_plans/txu-oclc-6547943.jpg.

Continuing with the biographical theme of his narrative, Elgrabli reports the significant role of his parents, in particular, in the way he attaches additional spiritual meaning to his Moroccan hometown: "When I reached the age of eleven, my parents bought me a *tallit* [prayer shawl] and a set of *tefillin* and made me a

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[42] For a comparable description of Novaredok that may have influenced Elgrabli's writing: Aharon Mirsky, *Novaredok: Brethren and Journey* (Jerusalem: Ratner, 2014), 53-56 [in Hebrew].

[43] Tsur, *A Torn Community*, 27-32.

bar-mitzva celebration, because it was customary [in Meknes] not to wait until the age of thirteen [...]."[44] His mother, Hannah, whom he reverently refers to as "my teacher," emerges as a woman of exceptional virtue and kindness.[45] Elgrabli fondly recounts how she would assemble a basket of food and task him with delivering it to specific individuals in need, be they widows or the impoverished, irrespective of the distance involved—or, in his own words, "the near and the far." This phrase—beyond exemplifying his mother's charitable nature—underscores how religious benevolence transcended both physical distance and familial ties to evolve into a symbol of his own roots in Meknes as a Moroccan center of Torah learning. These depictions, among others, mark the first "station" in his journey— a journey not confined to the physical realm of Meknes but rather extending into spiritual and emotional spaces as *point of departure* for his global journey.

The "Ark" Metaphor: From Static Maps to Mobile Spirituality

Deeply rooted in the customs, traditions, and values of his family and community, Elgrabli guides the reader through a series of geographical locations outside his Moroccan hometown, each symbolizing a spiritual hub on a global map. Included among them are sites in France, England, the United States, Argentina, and Israel that are known to him mainly because of their yeshivot.

In his narrative, Elgrabli personalizes geographic space by linking cities and towns not only to acquaintances and relatives but also to their religious significance. In doing so, he cultivates the image of a tightly knit world of saints—figures who embody his revered international religious network and lend additional spiritual coherence to his journey. The city of Bat Yam in central Israel, for example, is mentioned only as the home of Rabbi Zion, who generously lends Elgrabli religious books. When he refers to Gateshead, a town near Newcastle in northern England, he mentions it merely as the place where his relative, Rabbi Shimon Bitton, lives. To establish Bitton's relevance to his spiritual account, Elgrabli remarks that he was considered an *'ilui* (prodigy) in the local *kollel* (yeshiva for married men).[46]

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[44] Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim*, 1.
[45] Ibid., 2.
[46] Ibid., 1.

There was a time in the 1850s when the Newcastle Jewish community hosted German Jewish immigrants who had reached England to enhance their economic status and social mobility. By the 1980s, however, as Waterman and Kosmin emphasize, the voluntary concentration of Jewish communities in specific urban areas in Gateshead had created typical Haredi enclaves that prevented social assimilation.[47]
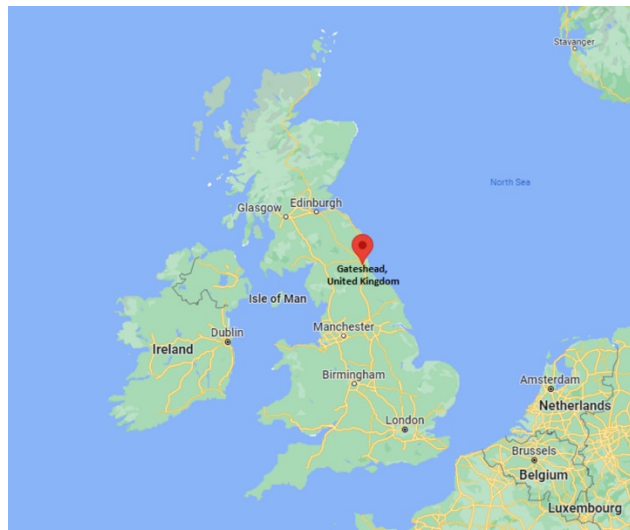

Fig. 3. The United Kingdom, https://www.whereig.com/united-kingdom/where-is-gateshead-uk.html.

More broadly, the Lithuanian yeshiva world was rooted in the historical context of East European Jewish modernity, expressed by the rise of Jewish emancipation and Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment), the later emergence of socialist tendencies, and the eventual conceptualization of modern Zionism.[48]

This notion of the yeshiva also resonates in Yoel Finkelman's study, which delves into the multifaceted role of the yeshiva as it transitioned from the East European context to the American one. Despite the differences in its regional and temporal contexts, the yeshiva in America continued to function as a "sacred space" where students could immerse themselves in Jewish learning while being shielded from

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[47] Shlomit Flint Ashery, "The Litvish Community of Gateshead: Reshaping the Territoriality of the Neighbourhood," in *Spatial Behavior in Haredi Jewish Communities in Great Britain,* ed. Shlomit Flint Ashery (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), 62 and 65-66, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25858-0_6.

[48] Ashery, "Litvish Community," 62-63; Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

external influences. Moreover, particularly in the American context, yeshivas sought to protect their students from what their rabbis perceived as the threatening environment outside the yeshiva walls. The Beth Medrash Govoha yeshiva in Lakewood, New Jersey, for example, fashions itself as a "total institution" and, as such, limits its students' contact with the outside world as an educational strategy that fosters students' devotion to religious studies.[49]

Similarly, the French yeshiva networks also strived to shield their students from the secular influences outside the walls. In France, yeshivot were typically established in small towns like Aix-les-Bains, far from major population centers such as Paris, Lyon, and Marseille; thus they could shield or isolate themselves from their surroundings in a manner that befit the educational philosophy of the Haredi movements. [50] This defining characteristic of the French yeshivot illustrates their resistance to the perceived excesses of modernity and reflects their day-to-day effort to police boundaries and define identities against the "others" who live beyond their spatial borders.

Drawing on such a notion of space and mobility, while describing his journey to Europe and the yeshiva world, Elgrabli employs the powerful metaphor of Noah's Ark, a concept deeply rooted in the Novaredok philosophy. He quotes the "Elder of Novaredok," Yosef Yoizel Horowitz (1847–1919), who declared the importance of sustaining the yeshiva tradition in France: "[...] Instead of running away and going to *deserts* and *caves* [as monks and prophets would do in biblical times], we should build and found yeshiva seminaries and Torah and moral *tents* to repair and build an ark to defend ourselves against the saboteurs and corrupters [...] The holy yeshivas are the *teva'* [ark] of today." Elgrabli's spatial narrative moves beyond the image of a static spiritual island surrounded by a moral wilderness. Instead, it evokes a sense of movement and the deliberate cultivation of a mobile, temporary fortress—a spiritual tent—where resilience is nurtured within a vast metaphorical desert marked by immorality.

As Elgrabli's account unfolds, he refers to the birthplace of Yeshivat Beit Yosef of the Novaredok school in Bergen-Belsen, Germany, during Nazi rule. After World War II, he explains, this yeshiva relocated to more prosperous locations in France:

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[49] Yoel Finkelman, "Haredi Isolation in Changing Environments: A Case Study in Yeshiva Immigration," *Modern Judaism* 22, no. 1 (2002): 71, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396734.

[50] Dahan, *From the Maghreb*, 70.

Bayeux, Fublaines, Armentières, and Boussier (sic. Poussier).[51] In this context, he points out that the material conditions of the yeshiva students improved and that they had grown spiritually, marking Paris as a better geographical place for the spiritual mobile "ark" that the yeshiva had become.

This perspective further underscores the dynamic interplay between geography and spirituality in Elgrabli's narrative, far transcending the simple concept of a physical journey from a "place of origin" to a "destination." His mental map—which aligns with his narratives of awakening and his personal pursuit of spiritual growth—is a passage between places, each of which he repeatedly classifies in comparison with the others. In this context, his journey from Morocco to Europe is portrayed not just as a migration to a more "developed" world, as it would in much of the literature on postcolonial migration. Such studies emphasize both the role of the ties between Morocco and its former colonial rulers, Spain and France, in mediating migration to these countries, and the Moroccan immigrants' ability to satisfy demand for low-skilled labor upon arrival.[52] Elgrabli's journey, in contrast, flows in direct correlation with an extension of his spiritual life-journey to new sanctuaries and "floating arks" in a vast secular desert, as I further describe below.

New Geographical Hierarchies on a Spiritual Journey

Elgrabli's mental maps differ significantly from the typical geopolitical maps that depict the migratory flows from Morocco to Europe or to Israel, as explained at the beginning of this essay. In his evolving narrative, rather than portraying his journey out of Morocco as an escape from a hostile Islamic regime as the Zionist meta-narrative might suggest (see the introduction), Elgrabli chooses to depict it as a "rescue" by those of the Torah world from Israel and the ostensible "rescue operation" that Israel launched for the Jews of the "Muslim lands."

In fact, Elgrabli's personal migration story commences with his express desire to carry out the act of 'aliyah, an aspiration fueled by the large-scale 'aliyah that

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[51] It is worth noting that all these places, aside from Fublaines, are relatively far from Paris.

[52] Hein de Haas, "Morocco's Migration Experience: A Transitional Perspective," *International Migration* 54, no. 4 (2007): 44-45.

followed the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948. This section of the preface, however, clearly reveals his alignment with anti-Zionist ideologies, which appear to stand in tension with the support he received from figures like Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who was known for a more pragmatic approach to the Zionist state. To avoid criticism of his "birthplace" community in Meknes, which would clash with the basic image of the city as a place of piety, he details how, in fact, he faced opposition from the leaders in his hometown when attempting to immigrate via Zionist networks. According to Elgrabli's narrative, his community perceived Zionism as a threat to their religious identity and practices. As Elgrabli writes, Rabbi Baruch Toledano, a prominent figure in his city and a key player in the creation of the Em ha-Banim school, opposed the secular Labor Zionist parties, Mapai, which enjoyed political hegemony in Israel at the time, as well as the pro-Soviet opposition party, Mapam. Despite the opposition that he faced, however, Elgrabli shares with the reader his unwavering determination to immigrate to Israel. His narrative features clear self-criticism of his behavior during the initial stages of his spiritual journey, blaming a moment in his "innocent" journey at the tender age of fourteen.[53]

Only with this biographical anecdote, which contrasts with his subsequent emigration from Morocco, can Elgrabli continue to describe his gradual "ascent" to a higher spiritual hub on his way out of his country of birth. His decision to depict Morocco as a sphere of secular Zionism and his travel to Marseille, France, where the Zionist training camp is based, mark a significant turning point in his Bildung. As he makes his way to the Zionist training camp by train—again, a moving object—a chance but miraculous comment by an Ashkenazi religious passenger prompts him to abruptly toss a Zionist novel that he was reading from the moving train. This act symbolizes the most significant moment of awakening that he experienced during his spiritual journey.

Interestingly, Elgrabli's account of his journey in his new country, France, is interspersed with detailed descriptions of the country's landscapes. As he makes his way from the Lyon train station to the nearby yeshiva, for example, he reports his climb up a steep hill with a heavy suitcase, which probably symbolizes— beyond any concrete memory of the physical landscape of the Lyon region—a

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[53] Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim*, 2-3.

spiritual effort to attain a new and higher spiritual level, as this may be interpreted given the context of his plot. Just as space and landscape are dynamic in his account, so, too, are the people who inhabit them. For example, Elgrabli specifically mentions the aid he receives from a gentile whom he encounters on the way to the yeshiva as he hauls his heavy luggage up the steep incline. In this telling, the gentile appears for a reason: he is an agent of the divine providence that Elgrabli receives along his journey. The narrative weaves together multiple references to real locations, presenting them as signs of divine intervention—meant to reassure readers that his unusual life journey was guided and affirmed not only by a broad spectrum of rabbinical authorities but also by Heaven itself.[54]

Morally Deficient Secular Israel and the Saintly Diaspora

Elgrabli's narrative of his journey in France not only challenges the secular Zionist meta-narrative of redemption from exile, it also aligns partly with the distinctly anti-Zionist ideology of the Novaredok yeshiva and the broader Musar movement. In accordance with Jewish tradition and the Talmudic passage known as the midrash of the Three Oaths, the Jewish people was sworn not to engineer mass 'aliyah and not to rebel against the nations, which, in turn, were sworn not to mistreat the Jews too badly. Thus, the Jews must remain in exile, even if under harsh conditions, and patiently await their divinely delivered redemption. Those who see this midrashic injunction as binding halakha (rabbinical law) also believe that the steadily growing numbers of non-observant Jewish immigrants to Israel are desecrating the Holy Land, rendering it unsuitable for redemption. In his account, Elgrabli is drawn to one of the Haredi groups that affirms this doctrine most adamantly, Neturei Karta. To demonstrate Neturei Karta's approach, this group reached out to the PLO in 1988, participating in anti-Israeli demonstrations among other things. Acknowledging this support, Yasser Arafat even announced the appointment of a Neturei Karta member as a minister in the government he was about to establish.[55]

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[54] Ibid., 2.

[55] Keren-Kratz, "Satmar and Neturei Karta," 4, 10, and 16-17.

Elgrabli expressly embraces the Neturei Karta idea in the body of his exegesis more than in the introduction to it.[56] Elgrabli, continuing his story, finds himself engaging with the Neturei Karta network, a new system that connects him to the Holy Land in a way that he had not anticipated when he was aspiring to leave Morocco. He begins to read *HaHoma* (The wall), the group's bulletin, immersing himself in its viewpoints. His engagement with *HaHoma* represents another turning point in his spiritual journey to the Holy Land, as he twines it with his personal spiritual development.[57] Strikingly, this story—steeped in the rhetoric of one of the most radical anti-Zionist factions—is presented to a readership in Jerusalem through a work endorsed by prominent mainstream Sephardi rabbis. This paradox highlights Elgrabli's unique ability to navigate between conflicting ideological realms, not only moving among them but also weaving them into a coherent narrative that frames his diverse experiences as spiritually and theologically meaningful. In doing so, he offers his readers a model of hybrid piety—an account that makes sense of contradiction by presenting it as providentially orchestrated spiritual growth. This approach, however, highlights Elgrabli's framing of space as divided between realms of piety and secularity, rather than along the more conventional national distinction between Israel and the Diaspora. This division of space opens the door to a new hierarchal categorization of moral space in the continuation of his story about the yeshiva in Lyon.

Revisited East–West Dichotomies

At the time in question and even today, Zionist emissaries and Israeli leaders often portray MENA Jews as a wholly "traditional" society unaffected by secularization or modern ideologies. Seeing this collective as a "backward" "Oriental" Jewish civilization, traditional and old-fashioned Zionist narratives propagated the idea that Europe-oriented Israel bears responsibility not only for the physical rescue of Moroccan Jews but also for their personal and collective cultural advancement.[58]

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[56] Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim*, 165.

[57] Ibid., 3-4.

[58] Yaron Tsur, "Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel," *Journal of Israeli History* 18, no. 1 (1997): 101-103.

Paradoxically, the modernization processes that the MENA Jewish communities experienced became crucial in highlighting the role of their European Jewish brethren in spiritually "rescuing" them from Western colonialism as they "accommodated modernity." The reasons for such openness became the topic of scholarly debate. Zvi Zohar, a prominent participant in this debate, argues that Sephardi rabbis exhibited a more flexible and accommodating approach to modernity than did their Ashkenazi counterparts, as Sephardi halakhic responses were diverse and not uniformly Orthodox. Zohar attributes this flexibility to the "classical Jewish-Spanish cultural tradition" that Sephardi Judaism inherited from the medieval Muslim-Arab world, which valued the integration of non-Jewish knowledge. This tradition, rooted in the Geonic period (sixth–eleventh centuries CE), allowed for the eventual resurgence of secular studies in Jewish education, particularly in the late nineteenth century as schools in the Middle East, Jewish and other, allowed sacred and secular curricula to mingle.[59]

Conversely, Benjamin Brown argues that the *hakhamim* (rabbis) of the East adopted responses to modernity that were no less Orthodox or reactionary than were those of their European counterparts. In other words, according to Brown, the perceived tolerance in Eastern traditions did not stem from an inherent cultural disposition but rather reflected differing degrees of exposure to European modernity, shaped by geographical and political circumstances.[60] These views reflect earlier ideas developed by Agudas Yisroel and other Haredi Jewish movements in Europe, which posited that Jews in the MENA region were not initially exposed to modernity to the same extent as were their counterparts in

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[59] Zvi Zohar, "Orthodoxy Is Not the Only Authentic Halakhic Response to Modernity: Sephardic and Ashkenazic Religious-Halakhic Cultures Are Different," *Akdamot* 10 (2001): 139-151. On Zohar's approach see also Yuval Haruvi, "The 'Long History' of Sephardi Rabbinic Moderation in Israeli Academic and Public Discourse," in *The Long History of the Mizrahim*, eds. Aviad Moreno, Noah Gerber, Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, and Ofer Shiff (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, 2021), 165-185 [in Hebrew]. For another critique of Zohar's position, see Harvey E. Goldberg, "Sephardic Rabbinic 'Openness' in Nineteenth-Century Tripoli: Examining a Modern Myth in Context," in *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality*, ed. Jack C. Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2004), 69-71.

[60] Benjamin Brown, "Scholars of the East and the Religious Zealotry: Points for Reexamination," *Akdamot* 10 (2001): 289-324 [in Hebrew]; Benjamin Brown, "Varieties of Orthodox Responses: Ashkenazim and Sephardim," in *Shas: Cultural and Ideological Perspectives*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Tel Aviv: Am Oved and Rabin Center for Israel Studies, 2006), 64 [in Hebrew].

Christian Europe. As colonial expansion increasingly brought European modernity to these regions, however, the belief evolved that European rabbis had to intervene in order to train local Jewish communities to resist as they should.[61] Elgrabli's spatial division echoes some of these perceptions. Against the backdrop of his experiences at the French Yeshivat Bet Yosef, he delves into a deeper understanding of "true" Judaism and the notion of ascent." In his view, though his hometown in Morocco indeed offered familial piety, it lacked the "advanced *musar*" ("ethicalness" as understood by the Musar Movement) he found in France.[62] In this context, therefore, moving to the Ashkenazi-dominated religious surroundings of France was seen in and of itself as an ascent and an advancement in Torah learning at the expense of his commitment to his origin community well after he found his path to the Ashkenazi Haredi realm.

In France, Elgrabli continues to harbor aspirations of ascent to the next spiritual station. His narrative unfolds with his meaningful encounter with the head of Yeshivat Mir of Brooklyn. This meeting catalyzes his move to the United States and the base of Yeshivat Mir. Upon arriving in America, Elgrabli opts to adjust not to the broader American society but to the Yiddish-speaking Jewish enclave in New York. There, Elgrabli is introduced to a new network, the Satmar Haredi community, known for its severe anti-Zionist stance. To attain full engagement in the yeshiva's classes, he dedicates himself to learning Yiddish, viewing this linguistic adaptation as a necessary step toward saintly upward mobility. His unwavering dedication to his studies and the values of his new yeshiva led to his attainment of a teaching certificate after three years, as he emphasizes in his story. This phase in his spiritual advancement, however, is not his last stop.

In the final part of his narrative, Elgrabli's account of spiritual ascent highlights his spiritual evolution as a contingency of his ability to adapt to new and improved religious environments. He underscores the importance of mentorship along his journey as he navigates from one spiritual hub to the next. In this context, Elgrabli

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[61] Moshe Bar-Yudah, ed., *Halakhah and Openness: The Sages of Morocco as Poskim for Our Generation* (Tel Aviv: Center for Education and Culture of the Histadrut, 1978) [in Hebrew]; Malka Katz, "Religious Zionism and Mizrahi Immigrants, between Positive and Negative Labeling: A Case Study from the First Years of the State," in *The Long History of the Mizrahim*, eds. Aviad Moreno, Noah Gerber, Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, and Ofer Shiff (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, 2021) 145-165 [in Hebrew].

[62] Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim*, 11.

attempts to demonstrate that the journey is not merely a personal one but also a voyage that entails the important step of returning to his hometown Moroccan community. At this point of the story, his main goal is, in fact, to gain recognition and legitimacy as a leader who was divinely chosen to lead—perhaps due to his hybrid character of being a well-trained scholar of a Moroccan origin. I demonstrate this presently.

From the Personal to the Communal

Back to Earth, back to Morocco

While Rabbi Elgrabli's journey overlooks concrete elements of space and time such as specific dates and townscapes, it does feature multiple anecdotes from the material world. His narrative illustrates how his spiritual journey is facilitated by a network of esteemed agents who help him move physically, perhaps as part of his attempt to showcase his acceptance in a global Torah world. For example, he recounts, in his encounter in France with the head of Yeshivat Mir, the letter of invitation that the latter gives him, a *sine qua non* for his obtaining a visa to the United States. Continuing, he reports that the yeshiva dean and a wealthy philanthropist subsidize his travel expenses, enabling him to journey from France to America and to continue to compose his narrative of awakening. Thus, Elgrabli's spiritual journey and his physical migration are deeply intertwined, facilitated by religious networks that grant him social prestige. The international Haredi community that funds his journey is portrayed as effectively substituting for the Zionist network that Elgrabli had initially joined in Morocco to begin his journey out of the country.[63]

His interactions with two famed Hasidic personalities, the Satmar Rebbe and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, further underscore this point. Both rabbis provide not only spiritual guidance but also practical assistance including financial support, a fact Elgrabli chooses to stress. Thus, the Satmar Rebbe subventions Elgrabli's travel expenses and the Lubavitcher Rebbe instructs a follower to honor a promise of

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[63] Ibid., 6.

financial aid. [64] It is worth noting that Yeshivat Mir in Brooklyn, unlike its counterpart in Aix-les-Bains, maintained a strictly anti-Zionist stance. During the 1950s, owing to the efforts of the philanthropist Yitzhak Shalom and Rabbi Abraham Kalmanovich, approximately 100 young Moroccan Jews made their way to the yeshiva for studies.[65]

In a surprising twist as the text winds down, Elgrabli's Moroccan origins reappear and are shown to play an important role in his journey, as his ascent is marked by his ability both to give back to the community and to seek personal growth in the spiritual world and its earthly networks. His acquired expertise in kosher poultry slaughter according to the Moroccan rite was a highly sought-after skill in the Sephardi community of Buenos Aires, his next stop after New York. Unlike the Yiddish that he acquired for the American leg of his journey, in Argentina his ability to speak Spanish—as a descendant of a Sephardi community from northern Morocco—enabled him to easily connect and interact with the Spanish-speaking Jewish community in Buenos Aires. In this phase of his personal development, as he helps others to maintain Jewish life, he deems himself to have reached an advanced stage of his trajectory.[66]

Although his narrative seems to describe a linear ascent from lower, less spiritually developed places to higher sanctuaries, Elgrabli's connection to his Moroccan community not only remains firm but is in fact a strong aspect of his advancement. Leveraging his newfound position within the Ashkenazi Haredi world, he actively advocates for his community back in Morocco. One notable example is his initiative to write to the Chief Rabbi of Morocco, asking in effect for matchmaking assistance in order to facilitate connections for single young men in his new Haredi community who are searching for suitable partners.[67]

Gabriel Elgrabli's journey is a testament to the power of local networks to facilitate personal growth and promote community service. Before his wedding, Rabbi Monsonigo, the director of Ozar ha-Torah Haredi Ashkenazi education system in Morocco, has already arranged a teaching position for Elgrabli at the Talmud Torah of Wazan, Morocco. This position not only helps him earn a decent living;

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[64] Ibid., 7.
[65] Dahan, *From the Maghreb*, 145.
[66] Elgrabli, *Tumat Yesharim*, 9.
[67] Ibid., 10.

it also allows him to continue giving back to the community that he had left as an "innocent" and immature teenager. As the account continues, Elgrabli moves to Casablanca two years later, where he continues his service as a ritual slaughterer and a supervisor of kosher food preparers.

To the Holy Land

Elgrabli's spiritual journey and geographical migration are intricately interwoven, each location providing a unique and dynamic spiritual experience that continually shapes his story of spiritual Bildung. Once again, the Holy Land— Eretz Israel—emerges as a site of profound importance in Elgrabli's spiritual cartography. It is not merely a geographic destination but a sacred locus of elevation and self-realization. Within his narrative, the Land of Israel functions as a spiritual axis that enables his continuous ascent and deepening of religious identity. Ultimately, it is Jerusalem—deliberately chosen for its symbolic position at the heart of his spiritual map—that becomes the stage upon which he returns, now transformed into a more refined and seasoned religious figure, capable of guiding and inspiring others. When his parents decide to consummate their 'aliyah, Elgrabli accompanies them. However, instead of settling with his parents and sisters in Nahariya, a town on the far northern coast of the country, he deliberately chooses to establish himself in Jerusalem, the spiritual heart of Judaism. His approach to the Holy Land is also reflected in his attitude toward his living conditions. In contrast to his reference to the importance of his material assets while he lived in France, when he considers selling his Jerusalem apartment to find a better one, his wife reminds him of his "apartment" in heaven, implying that the spiritual significance of their home far outweighs its physical attributes.

"The Chosen One"

Elgrabli's account of his youthful journey out of Morocco is a testament to his unwavering faith and the belief in divine intervention or oversight that guides his life. His journey, marked by significant events and encounters, is seen as miraculous, reinforcing his image as a divinely chosen mentor. The narrative includes references to moving objects such as trains and airplanes, symbols of

globalization and modernization that convey him on his miraculous journey through a secular world. These modes of transportation symbolize change, movement, and progress, taking him from one stage of his life to the next and facilitating his personal and spiritual growth.

Elgrabli's journey is not only about his personal spiritual growth, it also involves his role as a person who can give back to the community. In another instance of closure, his spiritual journey affects his own family network. His travels do not end with his settlement in Jerusalem; they serve instead as a starting point for his brother, Yosef. Initially, Yosef attends the Aix-les-Bains yeshiva in France, which is populated by mainstream Moroccan students. Guided by Elgrabli's advice and likely inspired by his spiritual journey, however, Yosef moves to the Novaredok yeshiva in Fublaines, near Paris, thus beginning his own spiritual and personal journey among hierarchical religious "arks." As Elgrabli's narrative ends, his experiences and decisions not only shape his own spiritual understanding and growth but also influence those around him, particularly his family. This act of mentorship underscores his role as a spiritual leader who is chosen to guide others on their spiritual paths.

Elgrabli's journey is characterized by challenging experiences that test his faith and resilience and catalyze his spiritual growth. One such experience is the fire that destroys his Jerusalem apartment. Though it could have been a moment defined by despair and doubt, Elgrabli interprets it through the lens of faith as a divine decree and an opportunity for spiritual growth. Another significant challenge is the antisemitic assault he experiences in Paris, a moment that could have shaken his faith or made him question his religious identity. He stands firm in his beliefs, however, and refuses to be intimidated or deterred by the bigotry he has met. These challenging experiences, while difficult, catalyze Elgrabli's spiritual growth in his awakening narrative from wrong to right.[68]
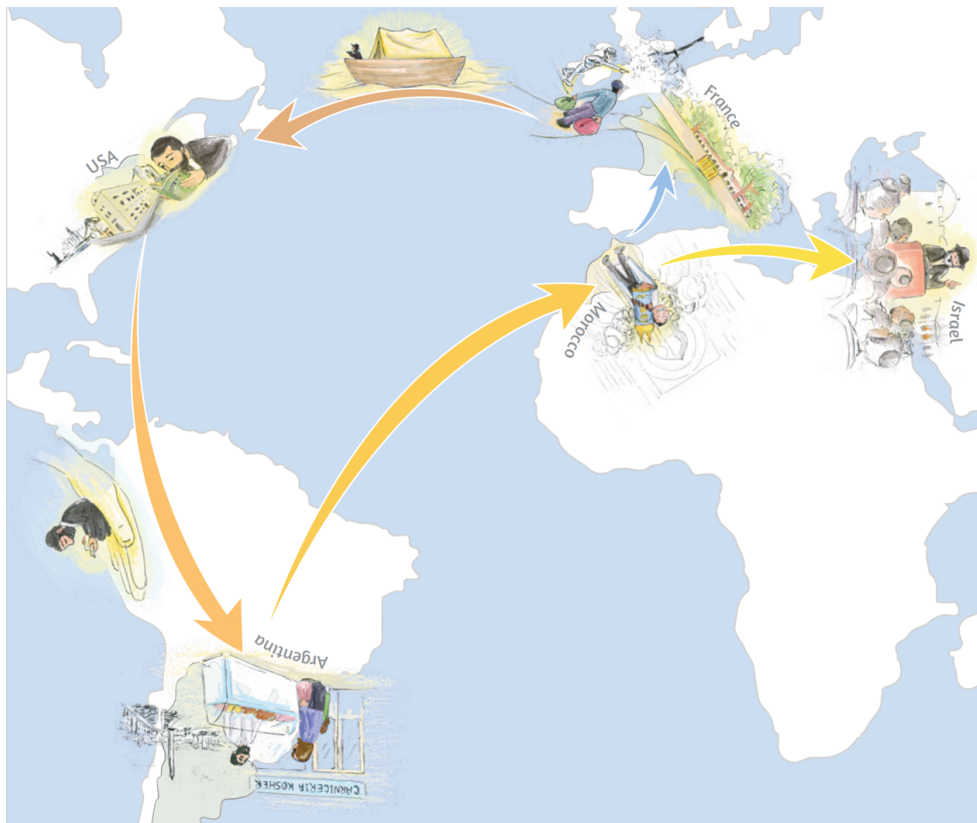
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[68] Ibid., 11.

Fig. 4. Fragments of Elgrabli's journey on a map of the world. Illustration by Zohar Gannot, 2025.

Conclusion

Despite the broader developments that shaped the emergence of Sephardi Haredism in Israel, Rabbi Gabriel Elgrabli's writing stands out as a deeply personal act of ideological mediation. His narrative reflects not merely the absorption of prevailing Haredi frameworks but a deliberate spiritual synthesis, drawing from diverse and often conflicting sources of authority. As his journey unfolds—from Meknes to Europe, the Americas, and finally Jerusalem—Elgrabli constructed a religious identity that is at once rooted in traditional Sephardi pietism and enriched by immersion in the Musar-infused world of Lithuanian yeshivot. He is not easily classified: neither a classical Porat Yosef Sephardi nor a typical product of the 1980s Sephardi-Lithuanian synthesis; neither a Novaredoker nor a direct disciple of Rabbi Shach or Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Yet he is paradoxically embraced by some of the most ideologically rigid circles, including the radical stream of the

Eda Haharedit, who refer to him as a *mezakeh et ha-rabbim* (one who brings merit to the public). His endorsements from figures as ideologically diverse as Rabbis Ovadia Yosef, Shalom Messas, and Moshe Halberstam, underscore his unique status as a boundary-crossing religious mediator.

This hybrid position reveals what might be called a "theological diplomacy"—an ability to inhabit contradictory religious worlds without collapsing their boundaries. As a ritual slaughterer and a preacher rather than a traditional Talmudic scholar, Elgrabli circumvents institutional hierarchies while earning widespread rabbinic approbation.

From this perspective, Elgrabli's recounted trajectory from Meknes to Jerusalem lies in reframing the elitist and inward-facing Musar tradition as a message for the spiritual enrichment of the people. Drawing from both the Novaredok emphasis on ethical discipline, and his Moroccan origins he retools Musar for broader audiences—offering them as he moved from one location to the other a spiritual roadmap that is rigorous yet culturally resonant.

In outlining his hybrid identity, Elgrabli constructs a complex moral map that charts a path between seemingly opposing realms. From Meknes to the Ashkenazi yeshiva world of Western Europe and the U.S., and back to the global Moroccan community, each stop adds to his spiritual credentials and reinforces his self-fashioning as a "chosen one. His story is a tale of spiritual tests and divine encounters, each marking a phase in a transformative journey. As he recounts it, the countries he traverses become less important than the sacred spaces and figures he engages—saints, yeshivot, and holy writings that map a transnational world of divine connection. Ultimately, Elgrabli's narrative challenges dominant metanarratives of migration and identity in Jewish modernity, as well as the spiritual geographies of the anti-Zionist Ashkenazi Haredi world. Its hybrid nature offers an alternative mental map—one that connects distinct centers and weaves them together to create new geographical imaginary tailored for his readers and audience.

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