

The Mimona Celebration

Alicia Sisso Raz

Mimona, the feast on the last night of Passover, has been celebrated by Moroccan Jews for centuries, and in the last years it is being celebrated by many Israelis, regardless of their origin. It is a joyful celebration that expresses the characteristic spirit of the community: joy of life, **Hahnasat Orhim** (hospitality), generosity, and a brotherhood sentiment.

Everybody is welcome to join the festivities on the Mimona. Homes are left open and are decorated with flowers, greens and wheat stalks. Tables are set up with symbolic food and a variety of sweets, still kosher for Passover, and the Mufleta, which is hametz. The Mufleta is the traditional crepe-like, eaten with butter and honey.

It is costumery to visit friends and family, going from house to house. In Morocco, there was a rigid order of who to visit first: it was customary to first go to the homes of the Cohen and the rabbis for their blessing, following by the homes of the elders and heads of the community, and then to visit family and friends.

There are several theories regarding the origin of the Mimona, or as it is called by the Spanish-speaking Moroccan Jews- Noche de Mimona.

~~~~~

According to one theory, it had originated in Fez, as the commemorating annual “**Se’uda**” (“Yurtzeit” event), honoring Rabbi Yosef Maimon, the father of Maimonides, who passed away in Fez, on the last day of Passover, in 1166. The traditional **Se’uda** comprised of prayers, religious discourses and dinner, changed its nature with time, and has evolved into the present celebration. 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.

~~~~~

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.

~~~~~

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 homes with wheat stalk and greens of all kind. Nissan-- the month of **Pessah**, was the first month in the Biblical calendar year, which may explain the agricultural aspect of the feast.

~~~~~

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 and culmination of the tolerance that existed between the Jews and 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 celebrate the recommence of the **Hametz**-eating.

~~~~~

Another theory relates the **Mimona** to an ancient Bereber custom. According to this theory, favored by the new historian, it was a celebration intended to pacify the Bereber Deity of Good Luck, whose name was **Lalla Mimouna**.

The recent book by Dr. Aharon Mamán, leans toward this explanation.

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

- One humorous theory has a simple linguistic explanation. **Mona** in Judeo-Spanish means a sweet roll, and since at the end of Passover we can eat bread, here comes **Mi Mona** = my bread.

~~~~~

The Mufleta

Mufleta is the Judeo-Moroccan name of the flattened crepe with which Moroccan Jews start to eat hametz. Msemna or Trit is how the Moroccan Muslims call a similar version of the Mufleta.

A while ago I came upon a Sandwich originated in Sicily made of flattened soft bread, rolled into a cylinder-like shape, that is called Mufulletta or Muffaletta. I found the resemblance in shape and linguistic to be striking. I was wondering about its etymological origin. In the encyclopedia of Jewish food, it is said that the Jews who fled to Morocco after the expulsion brought with them the Mufleta. It is added that the word is related to “pan Mouflet” —a medieval Provincial word for a round and soft bread baked on a griddle. The Mufleta, used to be prepared on a flat griddle, or an upside down shallow pan. In Miriam Webster dictionary a relation is mentioned to Muffula-- a fur mitten. In

Spanish however, ‘mofletes’ mean puffy cheeks. All these variations are associated than, with bread or items of soft or puffy rounded shape. From this we can infer that the Jewish Mufleta, the Sicilian Muffuletta, the Spanish ‘mofletes’ and the provincial Pan Mouflet may have the same etymological origin, which may go back to Late Latin. The shape and texture is similar—soft, flat and round. The Mufleta is rolled out into a cylinder and filled with butter and honey. The filling ingredients of the Sicilian Muffuletta are cheese and sausage.

If Late Latin is the origin of the word, can we assume that the name Mufleta may have indeed crossed the strait of Gibraltar to Morocco with the expelled Jews?

One puzzling thing remains. Why do the Jews in Northern Morocco who preserved their Spanish call it Terit, like the Moslims, whereas the Jews from Central and Southern Morocco call it Mufleta, a term that signals to a romance linguistic origin?

~~~~~

## The traditional symbolic food on the Mimona table

♣♣♣♣ - Fish – for good luck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

♣♣♣♣ Fish for good luck.

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

All are welcome to join the celebration; doors are left open. Each guest, whether familiar or stranger, is encouraged to enjoy the sweets and deserts, and is greeted with the traditional blessing: **Tirbehu Utis'adu** (success and good luck in Judeo Moroccan), and the Spanish-speaking greet everyone with:

**A Mimon, A Shalom, A baba terbah**

