



PROJECT MUSE®

Without Bounds

Yoram Bilu

Published by Wayne State University Press

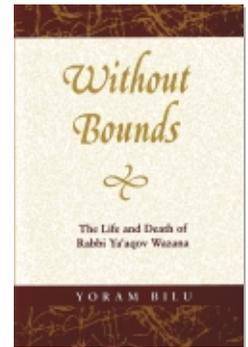
Bilu, Yoram.

Without Bounds: The Life and Death of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana.

Wayne State University Press, 2017.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/56561>

Access provided at 18 Jan 2020 11:42 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

4

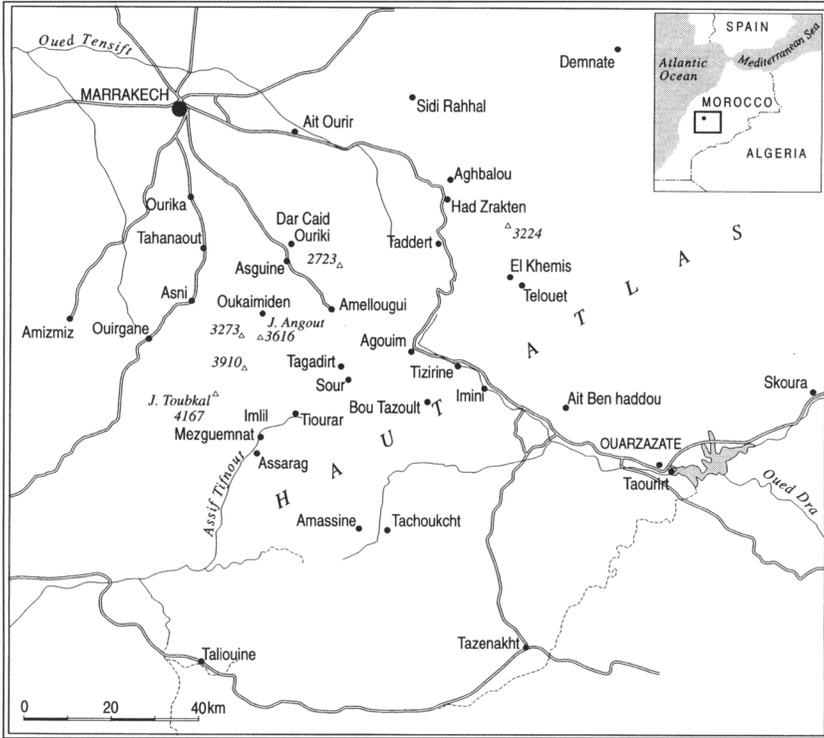
Born in Assarag— In the Heart of the Atlas Mountains



Wazana was born at the beginning of the century in the village of Assarag, in the heart of the Western Atlas Mountains. This rural area is traversed by the Tifnoute River and lies at the edge of the highest peaks of the Atlas range. Assarag is isolated and hard to reach, especially in winter when thick snow blankets the ground. Far removed from the large Jewish centers on the coast and in the north of the country, the tiny Jewish communities of Tifnoute made their home among the settlements of the Berber tribes. The marginality of the local Jews had a linguistic manifestation: some of them spoke only the local Berber dialect, as opposed to Arabic, the language normally used by Moroccan Jewry. As far as we know, this linguistic anomaly was unknown elsewhere in Morocco (cf. Goldberg 1983: 63).

As in other parts of southern Morocco, the Jews of Tifnoute made their livelihood working as small traders, itinerant peddlers, and artisans. They were tailors, blacksmiths, and metal workers, pack harness makers, and saddle fitters. They manufactured bellows for charcoal furnaces, and specialized in producing different types of footwear: shoes, sandals, slippers, and snow boots. They used to peddle their merchandise among the nearby villages, plying their specialist trades to Jews and their Muslim residents. Only a handful of the Tifnoute Jews actually worked as farmers, but it was not uncommon for people to share in working the land or raising animals with their Muslim neighbors, and then apportion the yield between them.¹ Although not without some tension, life among the Muslims was generally marked by harmonious relations. While Muslim

Chapter 4



Wazana's Territory

Agouim, where Wazana spent his last years, and where he died, is located in the center of the map on the Marrakech-Ouarzazate Road. Assarag, where he was born, is southwest of Agouim, on the Tifnout River. Ca. 1990

law ascribed the Jews an inferior status,² the necessities of day-to-day coexistence tended to mitigate the standing of the Jews. The services they rendered for their Muslim farmer neighbors were material, and thus there developed an intricate network of family and personal relationships which guaranteed the Jews the protection of their neighbors. Prior to the arrival of the French, the region fell outside the sphere of central government control, and in time earned a reputation as the “strife territory” (*Bled-es-siba*), due to the conditions of political instability and lack of personal security that prevailed. Under the circumstances, the patronage enjoyed by the Jews assured at least a tolerable form of existence.³

From the safety of the present in contemporary Israel, the former Jews of Assarag look back on life in the village with fond nostalgia. They acknowledge the hardship and extreme poverty, and remember clearly the wretched, humble clay houses they once called home. Neither has the oppressive hand of the autocratic local ruler based in the kasbah

In the Heart of the Atlas Mountains

of Telouet been forgotten. Surfaced roads, electricity, and running water were unknown until after the last of the Jews left for Israel in the early 1950s. On the other hand, the land was lush and water abundant in both summer and winter. The region was renowned locally for its bountiful produce, the fruit in particular. Compared with the intensity of life in present-day Israel, the agrarian simplicity of Assarag seems an ocean of tranquillity, contentment, and well-being.

In the eyes of the Moroccan immigrants, the heaviest price for leaving Morocco has been the warm, close-knit relationships that typified their life in these small, stable communities. They further yearn for the singular spiritual and religious atmosphere that crowned village life, and the fact that, without exception, the community was devout in its traditions. It is surprising as well as laudable that the inhabitants of these tiny enclaves set such store by their Jewishness. Notwithstanding their isolation, the communities managed to nurture strong ties with rabbinical centers in Marrakech and other cities. Every village or group of villages established its own synagogue and cemetery, and all had the necessary ritual functionaries: a *shohet*, *mohel*, cantor, and teachers of Torah. Occasionally, a few or all of these services were carried out by one person. Until the age of *bar mitzvah* (thirteen years old), boys learned reading, writing, and scripture in the local synagogue (*sla*), and those with ability whose families could afford it were sent to study in a religious academy (*yeshiva*) in Marrakech or Casablanca. Some young men returned home ordained as rabbis or *shohatim* (pl.) and contributed to maintaining the essential ritual traditions of Jewish life.

How large was the Jewish population of Assarag? According to the informants, approximately twenty or thirty families; however, this number, which might possibly be a little exaggerated, relates to the beginning of the century (when Wazana was a child). Thereafter, the size of the Jewish community in Assarag gradually dwindled, and, by the time Wazana left following his mother's death in the late 1940s, only a handful of Jews remained. The size of the Jewish population has been offered as the principal reason for Wazana's flight.

As noted before, the healer's family tree boasts both rabbis and sages, some of whom achieved recognition as *tsaddiqim* far beyond the precincts of the Tifnoute region. Hence, Wazana's family history afforded him significant merits of holiness and blessing transmitted through the generations.⁴ It is important to understand the significance of this privilege within the traditional Jewish society of southern Morocco, where cults of *tsaddiqim* enjoyed a scope and power unparalleled in any other Jewish group (see Ben-Ami 1984; Bilu 1990; Goldberg 1992; Shokeid 1971; and Stillman 1982). The emphasis placed by mystical as well as other Jewish traditions on the importance of the *tsaddiq* was combined with the traditional Islamic veneration of holy men in Morocco (Eickelman

Chapter 4

1976; Geertz 1968; Gellner 1969; and Westermarck 1926) to assure the *tsaddiq* a central position in the lives of the Jews. Entire communities made pilgrimages to the *tsaddiq*'s grave to mark his *hillula*, individuals visited the tomb in times of trouble, and families lit candles and held thanksgiving feasts at home in his honor. They named their babies after him and prayed to him for help whenever and wherever the need arose. Thus, the bond between the *tsaddiq* and the faithful was close, highly personal, and often lasted a lifetime.

Why did the Wazana family, with its glittering pedigree, settle in the small, peripheral village of Assarag? The legend records a miraculous journey from the Dra Valley to Ouarzazate which established Rabbi Avraham "The Great," the dynasty founder, as a popular *tsaddiq*. As we have noted, his son, Rabbi David, who was no less powerful than his father, established his home in the town of Ouarzazate where he raised a large family. As his sons reached adulthood and were acknowledged as rabbis and sages possessing the family powers, Rabbi David deployed them to different localities to avoid the possibility of competition and conflict. So it was that one of the sons, Rabbi Avraham Wazana, named after his illustrious grandfather, came to the village of Assarag where his own son, Ya'aqov, was born.